

CALIGULA

and

CROSS PURPOSE

(Le Malentendu)

By the same Author

THE OUTSIDER

ALBERT CAMUS

CALIGULA

and

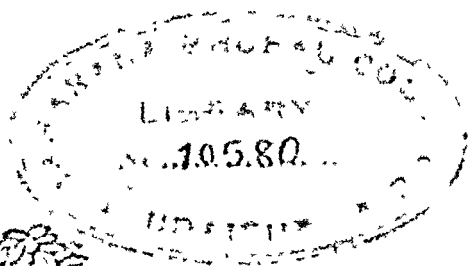
CROSS PURPOSE

(Le Malentendu)

Translated by
STUART GILBERT



HAMISH HAMILTON
LONDON



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CALIGULA

A Play in Four Acts

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

CALIGULA, aged from twenty-five to twenty-nine

CAESONIA, Caligula's mistress, aged thirty

HELICON, Caligula's intimate friend, aged thirty

SCIPIO, aged seventeen

CHEREA, aged thirty

THE OLD PATRICIAN, aged seventy-one

MEREIA, aged sixty

MUCIUS, aged thirty-three

THE INTENDANT, aged fifty

FIRST PATRICIAN

SECOND PATRICIAN

THIRD PATRICIAN

KNIGHTS, PALACE GUARDS, SERVANTS

} aged from forty to sixty

The scene of the First, Third and Fourth Acts is a State Room in the Imperial Palace. In it are a mirror (man's height), a gong, and a couch. The scene of the Second Act is CHEREA's dining-room.

ACT I

A number of patricians, one a very old man, are gathered in a State Room of the Palace. They are showing signs of nervousness.

FIRST PATRICIAN

Still no news.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

None last night, none this morning.

SECOND PATRICIAN

Three days without news. Strange indeed!

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Our messengers go out, our messengers return. And always they shake their heads and say, "Nothing."

SECOND PATRICIAN

They've combed the whole countryside. What more can be done?

FIRST PATRICIAN

We can only wait. It's no use meeting trouble half way. Perhaps he'll return as abruptly as he left us.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

When I saw him leaving the Palace, I noticed a queer look in his eyes.

FIRST PATRICIAN

Yes, so did I. In fact I asked him what was amiss.

SECOND PATRICIAN

Did he answer?

FIRST PATRICIAN

One word. "Nothing."

A short silence. HELICON enters. He is munching onions.

ACT I]

CALIGULA

SECOND PATRICIAN

[*In the same nervous tone.*] It's all very perturbing.

FIRST PATRICIAN

Oh, come now! All young fellows are like that.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

You're right there. They take things hard. But time smooths everything out.

SECOND PATRICIAN

Do you really think so?

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Of course. For one girl dead, a dozen living ones.

HELICON

Ah? So you think that there's a girl behind it?

FIRST PATRICIAN

What else should there be? Anyhow—thank goodness!—grief never lasts for ever. Is any one of us here capable of mourning a loss for more than a year on end?

SECOND PATRICIAN

Not I, anyhow.

FIRST PATRICIAN

No one can do that.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Life would be intolerable if one could.

FIRST PATRICIAN

Quite so. Take my case. I lost my wife last year. I shed many tears, and then I forgot. Even now I feel a pang of grief at times. But, happily, it doesn't amount to much.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Yes, Nature's a great healer.

CHEREA enters.

FIRST PATRICIAN

Well . . . ?

CHEREA

Still nothing.

HELICON

Come, gentlemen! There's no need for consternation.

FIRST PATRICIAN

I agree.

HELICON

Worrying won't mend matters—and it's lunch-time.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

That's so. We mustn't drop the prey for the shadow.

CHEREA

I don't like the look of things. But all was going too smoothly. As an emperor, he was perfection's self.

SECOND PATRICIAN

Yes, exactly the emperor we wanted; conscientious and inexperienced.

FIRST PATRICIAN

But what's come over you? There's no reason for all these lamentations. We've no ground for assuming he will change. Let's say he loved Drusilla. Only natural; she was his sister. Or say his love for her was something more than brotherly; shocking enough, I grant you. But it's really going too far, setting all Rome in a turmoil because the girl has died.

CHEREA

Maybe. But, as I said, I don't like the look of things; this escapade alarms me.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Yes, there's never smoke without fire.

FIRST PATRICIAN

In any case, the interests of the State should prevent his making a public tragedy of . . . of, let's say, a regrettable attachment. No doubt such things happen; but the less said the better.

HELICON

How can you be sure Drusilla is the cause of all this trouble?

ACT I]

CALIGULA

SECOND PATRICIAN

Who else should it be?

HELICON

Nobody at all, quite likely. When there's a host of explanations to choose from, why pick on the stupidest, most obvious one?

Young SCIPIO enters. CHEREA goes towards him.

CHEREA

Well?

SCIPIO

Still nothing. Except that some peasants think they saw him last night not far from Rome, rushing through the storm.

CHEREA comes back to the PATRICIANS, SCIPIO following him.

CHEREA

That makes three days, Scipio, doesn't it?

SCIPIO

Yes . . . I was there, following him as I usually do. He went up to Drusilla's body. He stroked it with two fingers, and seemed lost in thought for a long while. Then he swung round and walked out, calmly enough. . . . And ever since we've been hunting for him—in vain.

CHEREA

[*Shaking his head.*] That young man was too fond of literature.

SECOND PATRICIAN

Oh, at his age, you know . . .

CHEREA

At his age, perhaps; but not in his position. An artistic emperor is an anomaly. I grant you we've had one or two; misfits happen in the best of empires. But the others had the good taste to remember they were public servants.

FIRST PATRICIAN

It made things run more smoothly.

CALIGULA

[Act I

THE OLD PATRICIAN

One man, one job—that's how it should be.

SCIPIO

What can we do, Cherea?

CHEREA

Nothing.

SECOND PATRICIAN

We can only wait. If he doesn't return, a successor will have to be found. Between ourselves—there's no shortage of candidates.

FIRST PATRICIAN

No, but there's a shortage of the right sort.

CHEREA

Suppose he comes back in an ugly mood?

FIRST PATRICIAN

Oh, he's a mere boy; we'll make him see reason.

CHEREA

And what if he declines to see it?

FIRST PATRICIAN

[*Laughing.*] In that case, my friend, don't forget I once wrote a manual of revolutions. You'll find all the rules there.

CHEREA

I'll look it up—if things come to that. But I'd rather be left to my books.

SCIPIO

If you'll excuse me . . .

Goes out.

CHEREA

He's huffed.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Scipio is young, and young folk always hang together.

HELICON

Scipio doesn't count, anyhow.

Enter a member of the Imperial Bodyguard.

THE GUARDSMAN

Caligula has been seen in the Palace Gardens.

All leave the room. The stage is empty for some moments. Then CALIGULA enters stealthily from the Left. His legs are caked with mud, his garments dirty; his hair is wet, his look distraught. He brings his hand to his mouth several times. Then he approaches a mirror, stopping abruptly when he catches sight of his reflected self. After muttering some unintelligible words, he sits down on the right, letting his arms hang limp between his knees. HELICON enters, Left. On seeing CALIGULA, he stops at the far end of the stage and contemplates him in silence. CALIGULA turns and sees him. A short silence.

HELICON

[*Across the stage.*] Good morning, Caius.

CALIGULA

[*In quite an ordinary tone.*] Good morning, Helicon.
A short silence.

HELICON

You're looking tired.

CALIGULA

I've walked a lot.

HELICON

Yes, you've been away for quite a while.
Another short silence.

CALIGULA

It was hard to find.

HELICON

What was hard to find?"

CALIGULA

What I was after.

HELICON

Meaning?

CALIGULA

[*In the same matter-of-fact tone.*] The moon.

CALIGULA

[Act I

HELICON

What?

CALIGULA

Yes, I wanted the moon.

HELICON

Ah . . . [*Another silence. HELICON approaches CALIGULA.*]
And why did you want it?

CALIGULA

Well . . . it's one of the things I haven't got.

HELICON

I see. And now—have you fixed it up to your satisfaction?

CALIGULA

No. I couldn't get it.

HELICON

Too bad!

CALIGULA

Yes, and that's why I'm tired. [*Pauses. Then*] Helicon!

HELICON

Yes, Caius?

CALIGULA

No doubt, you think I'm crazy.

HELICON

As you know well, I never think.

CALIGULA

Ah yes. . . . Now, listen! I'm not mad; in fact I've never felt so lucid. What happened to me is quite simple; I suddenly felt a desire for the impossible. That's all. [*Pauses.*]
Things as they are, in my opinion, are far from satisfactory.

HELICON

Many people share your opinion.

CALIGULA

That is so. But in the past I didn't realize it. *Now* I know.
[*Still in the same matter-of-fact tone.*] Really, this world of ours, the scheme of things as they call it, is quite intolerable.

ACT I]

CALIGULA

That's why I want the moon, or happiness, or eternal life—something, in fact, that may sound crazy, but which isn't of this world.

HELICON

That's sound enough in theory. Only, in practice one can't carry it through to its conclusion.

CALIGULA

[*Rising to his feet, but still with perfect calmness.*] You're wrong there. It's just because no one *dares* to follow up his ideas to the end that nothing is achieved. All that's needed, I should say, is to be logical right through, at all costs. [*He studies HELICON's face.*] I can see, too, what you're thinking. What a pothor over a woman's death! But that's not it. True enough, I seem to remember that a woman died some days ago; a woman whom I loved. But love, what is it? A side-issue. And I swear to you her death is not the point; it's no more than the symbol of a truth that makes the moon essential to me. A childishly simple, obvious, almost silly truth, but one that's hard to come by and heavy to endure.

HELICON

May I know what it is, this truth that you've discovered?

CALIGULA

[*His eyes averted, in a toneless voice.*] Men die; and they are not happy.

HELICON

[*After a short pause.*] Anyhow, Caligula, it's a truth with which one comes to terms, without much trouble. Only look at the people over there. This truth of yours doesn't prevent them from enjoying their meal.

CALIGULA

[*With sudden violence.*] All it proves is that I'm surrounded by lies and self-deception. But I've had enough of that; I wish men to live by the light of truth. And I've the power to make them do so. For I know what they need and haven't

CALIGULA

[ACT I

got. They're without understanding and they need a teacher ; someone who knows what he's talking about.

HELICON

Don't take offence, Caius, if I give you a word of advice . . . But that can wait. First, you should have some rest.

CALIGULA

[*Sitting down. His voice is gentle again.*] That's not possible, Helicon. I shall never rest again.

HELICON

But—why?

CALIGULA

If I sleep, who'll give me the moon?

HELICON

[*After a short silence.*] That's true.

CALIGULA

[*Rising to his feet again, with an effort.*] Listen, Helicon . . . I hear footsteps, voices. Say nothing—and forget you've seen me.

HELICON

I understand.

CALIGULA

[*Looking back, as he moves towards the door.*] And please help me, from now on.

HELICON

I've no reason not to do so, Caius. But I know very few things, and few things interest me. In what way can I help you?

CALIGULA

In the way of . . . the impossible.

HELICON

I'll do my best.

CALIGULA goes out. SCIPIO and CAESONIA enter hurriedly.

SCIPIO

No one! Haven't you seen him?

HELICON

No.

CAESONIA

Tell me, Helicon. Are you quite sure he didn't say anything to you before he went away?

HELICON

I'm not a sharer of his secrets, I'm his public. A mere onlooker. It's more prudent.

CAESONIA

Please don't talk like that.

HELICON

My dear Caesonia, Caius is an idealist as we all know. He follows his bent, and no one can foresee where it will take him . . . But, if you'll excuse me, I'll go to lunch.

Exit HELICON.

CAESONIA

[*Sinking wearily on to a divan.*] One of the Palace Guards saw him go by. But all Rome sees Caligula everywhere. And Caligula, of course, sees nothing but his own idea.

SCIPIO

What idea?

CAESONIA

How can I tell, Scipio?

SCIPIO

Are you thinking of Drusilla?

CAESONIA

Perhaps. One thing is sure; he loved her. And it's a cruel thing to have someone die to-day whom only yesterday you were holding in your arms.

SCIPIO

[*Timidly.*] And you . . . ?

CAESONIA

Oh, I'm the old, trusted mistress. That's my rôle.

SCIPIO

Caesonia, we must save him.

CAESONIA

So you, too, love him?

SCIPIO

Yes. He's been very good to me. He encouraged me; I shall never forget some of the things he said. He told me life isn't easy, but it has consolations: religion, art, and the love one inspires in others. He often told me that the only mistake one makes in life is to cause others suffering. He tried to be a just man.

CAESONIA

[*Rising.*] He's only a child. [*She goes to the glass and scans herself.*] The only god I've ever had is my body, and now I shall pray this god of mine to give Caius back to me.

CALIGULA enters. On seeing CAESONIA and SCIPIO he hesitates, and takes a backward step. At the same moment several men enter from the opposite side of the room: PATRICIANS and the INTENDANT of the Palace. They stop short when they see CALIGULA. CAESONIA turns. She and SCIPIO hurry towards CALIGULA, who checks them with a gesture.

INTENDANT

[*In a rather quavering voice.*] We . . . we've been looking for you, Caesar, high and low.

CALIGULA

[*In a changed, harsh tone.*] So I see.

INTENDANT

We . . . I mean . . .

CALIGULA

[*Roughly.*] What do you want?

INTENDANT

We were feeling anxious, Caesar.

CALIGULA

[*Going towards him.*] What business had you to feel anxious?

INTENDANT

Well . . . er . . . [*He has an inspiration.*] Well, as you know,

ACT I]

CALIGULA

there are points to be settled in connection with the Treasury.

CALIGULA

[*Bursting into laughter.*] Ah, yes. The Treasury! That's so. The Treasury's of prime importance.

INTENDANT

Yes, indeed.

CALIGULA

[*Still laughing, to CAESONIA.*] Don't you agree, my dear? The Treasury is all-important.

CAESONIA

No, Caligula. It's a secondary matter.

CALIGULA

That only shows your ignorance. We are extremely interested in our Treasury. Everything's important: our fiscal system, public morals, foreign policy, army equipment and agrarian laws. Everything's of cardinal importance, I assure you. And everything's on an equal footing: the grandeur of Rome and your attacks of arthritis . . . Well, well, I'm going to apply my mind to all that. And, to begin with . . . Now listen well, Intendant.

INTENDANT

We are listening, sir.

The PATRICIANS come forward.

CALIGULA

You're our loyal subjects, are you not?

INTENDANT

[*In a reproachful tone.*] Oh, Caesar . . . !

CALIGULA

Well, I've something to propose to you. We're going to make a complete change in our economic system. In two moves. Drastic and abrupt. I'll explain, Intendant . . . when the Patricians have left. [*The PATRICIANS go out*]
CALIGULA *seats himself beside CAESONIA, with his arm round*

her waist.] Now mark my words. The first move's this. Every Patrician, everyone in the Empire who has any capital—small or large, it's all the same thing—is ordered to disinherit his children and make a new will leaving his money to the State.

INTENDANT

But, Caesar . . .

CALIGULA

I've not yet given you leave to speak. As the need arises, we shall have these people die; a list will be drawn up by us fixing the order of their deaths. When the fancy takes us, we may modify that order. And, of course, we shall step into their money.

CAESONIA

[Freeing herself.] But—what's come over you?

CALIGULA

[Imperturbably.] Obviously the order of their going has no importance. Or, rather, all these executions have an equal importance—from which it follows that none has any. Really all those fellows are on a par, one's as guilty as another. *[To the INTENDANT, peremptorily.]* You are to promulgate this edict without a moment's delay and see it's carried out forthwith. The wills are to be signed by residents in Rome this evening; within a month at the latest by persons in the provinces. Send out your messengers.

INTENDANT

Caesar, I wonder if you realize . . .

CALIGULA

Do I realize . . . ? Now, listen well, you fool! If the Treasury has paramount importance, human life has none. That should be obvious to you. People who think like you are bound to admit the logic of my edict and, since money is the only thing that counts, should set no value on their lives or anyone else's. I have resolved to be logical, and I have the power to enforce my will. Presently you'll see

Act II

CALIGULA

what logic's going to cost you; I shall eliminate contradictions and contradictors. If necessary, I'll begin with you.

INTENDANT

Caesar, my good will can be relied on, that I swear.

CALIGULA

And mine, too; that I guarantee. Just see how ready I am to adopt your point of view, and give the Treasury the first place in my programme. Really you should be grateful to me; I'm playing into your hand, and with your own cards. [*He pauses, before continuing in a flat, unemotional tone.*] In any case there is a touch of genius in the simplicity of my plan—which clinches the matter. I give you three seconds in which to remove yourself. One . . .

The INTENDANT hurries out.

CAESONIA

I can't believe it's you! But it was just a joke, wasn't it?—all you said to him.

CALIGULA

Not quite that, Caesonia. Let's say, a lesson in statesmanship.

SCIPIO

But, Caius, it's . . . it's impossible!

CALIGULA

That's the whole point.

SCIPIO

I don't follow.

CALIGULA

I repeat—that is my point. I'm exploiting the impossible. Or, more accurately, it's a question of making the impossible possible.

SCIPIO

But that game may lead to—to anything! It's a lunatic's pastime.

CALIGULA

No, Scipio. An emperor's vocation. [*He lets himself sink*

back wearily amongst the cushions.] Ah, my dears, at last I've come to see the uses of supremacy. It gives impossibilities a run. From this day on, so long as life is mine, my freedom has no frontier.

CAESONIA

[*Sadly.*] I doubt if this discovery of yours will make us any happier.

CALIGULA

So do I. But, I suppose, we'll have to live it through.

CHEREA *enters.*

CHEREA

I have just heard of your return. I trust your health is all it should be.

CALIGULA

My health is duly grateful. [*A pause. Then, abruptly.*] Leave us, Cherea. I don't want to see you.

CHEREA

Really, Caius, I'm amazed . . .

CALIGULA

There's nothing to be amazed at. I don't like literary men, and I can't bear lies.

CHEREA

If we lie, it's often without knowing it. I plead Not Guilty.

CALIGULA

Lies are never guiltless. And yours attribute importance to people and to things. That's what I cannot forgive you.

CHEREA

And yet—since this world is the only one we have, why not plead its cause?

CALIGULA

Your pleading comes too late, the verdict's given . . . This world has no importance; once a man realizes that, he wins his freedom. [*He has risen to his feet.*] And that is why I hate you, you and your kind; because you are not free. You see in me the one free man in the whole Roman

ACT I]

CALIGULA

Empire. You should be glad to have at last amongst you an emperor who points the way to freedom. Leave me, Cherea; and you, too, Scipio, go—for what is friendship? Go, both of you, and spread the news in Rome that freedom has been given her at last, and with the gift begins a great probation.

They go out. CALIGULA has turned away, hiding his eyes.

CAESONIA

Crying?

CALIGULA

Yes, Caesonia.

CAESONIA

But, after all, what's changed in your life? You may have loved Drusilla, but you loved many others—myself included—at the same time. Surely that wasn't enough to set you roaming the countryside for three days and nights and bring you back with this . . . this cruel look on your face?

CALIGULA

[*Swinging round on her.*] What nonsense is this? Why drag in Drusilla? Do you imagine love's the only thing that can make a man shed tears?

CAESONIA

I'm sorry, Caius. Only I was trying to understand.

CALIGULA

Men weep because . . . the world's all wrong. [*She comes towards him.*] No, Caesonia. [*She draws back.*] But stay beside me.

CAESONIA

I'll do whatever you wish. [*Sits down.*] At my age one knows that life's a sad business. But why deliberately set out to make it worse?

CALIGULA

No, it's no good; you can't understand. But what matter? find a way out. Only, I feel a curious stirring as if undreamt-of things were forcing their

way up into the light—and I'm helpless against them. [*He moves closer to her.*] Oh, Caesonia, I knew that men felt anguish, but I didn't know what that word, anguish, meant. Like everyone else I fancied it was a sickness of the mind—no more. But no, it's my body that's in pain. Pain everywhere, in my chest, in my legs and arms. Even my skin is raw, my head is buzzing, I feel like vomiting. But worst of all is this queer taste in my mouth. Not blood, or death, or fever, but a mixture of all three. I've only to stir my tongue, and the world goes black, and everyone looks . . . horrible. How hard, how cruel it is, this process of becoming a man!

CAESONIA

What you need, my dear, is a good, long sleep. Let yourself relax and, above all, stop thinking. I'll stay by you while you sleep. And when you wake, you'll find the world's got back its savour. Then you must use your power to good effect—for loving better what you still find lovable. For the possible, too, deserves to be given a chance.

CALIGULA

Ah, but for that I'd need to sleep, to let myself go—and that's impossible.

CAESONIA

So one always thinks when one is over-tired. A time comes when one's hand is firm again.

CALIGULA

But one must know where to place it. And what's the use to me of a firm hand, what use is the amazing power that's mine, if I can't have the sun set in the east, if I can't reduce the sum of suffering and make an end of death? No, Caesonia, it's all one whether I sleep or keep awake, if I've no power to tamper with the scheme of things.

CAESONIA

But that's madness, sheer madness. It's wanting to be a god on earth.

CALIGULA

So you, too, think I'm mad. And yet—what is a god that I should wish to be his equal? No, it's something higher, far above the gods, that I'm aiming at, longing for with all my heart and soul. I am taking over a kingdom where the impossible is king.

CAESONIA

You can't prevent the sky from being the sky, or a fresh young face from ageing, or a man's heart from growing cold.

CALIGULA

[*With rising excitement.*] I want . . . I want to drown the sky in the sea, to infuse ugliness with beauty, to wring a laugh from pain.

CAESONIA

[*Facing him with an imploring gesture.*] There's good and bad, high and low, justice and injustice. And I swear to you these will never change.

CALIGULA

[*In the same tone.*] And I'm resolved to change them . . . I shall make this age of ours a kingly gift—the gift of equality. And when all is levelled out, when the impossible . . . perhaps, I shall be transfigured and the world renewed; then men will die no more and at last be happy.

CAESONIA

[*With a little cry.*] And love? Surely I won't go back on love!

CALIGULA

[*In a wild burst of anger.*] Love, Caesonia! [*He grips her shoulders and shakes her.*] I've learnt the quite right—you it's nothing, nothing! That fellow was y the Treasury heard what he said, didn't you?—it's on now at last I'm that counts. The fountain-head of all. Ah, it, is the opposite of loving. I know what I'm talking!

invite you to the most gorgeous of shows, a sight for gods to gloat on, a whole world called to judgment. But for that I must have a crowd—spectators, victims, criminals, hundreds and thousands of them. [*He rushes to the gong and begins hammering on it, faster and faster.*] Let the accused come forward. I want my criminals, and they all are criminals. [*Still striking the gong.*] Bring in the condemned men. I must have my public. Judges, witnesses, accused—all sentenced to death without a hearing. Yes, Caesonia, I'll show them something they have never seen before, the one free man in the Roman Empire. [*To the clangour of the gong the Palace has been gradually filling with noises; the clash of arms, voices, footsteps slow or hurried, coming nearer, growing louder. Some soldiers enter, and leave hastily.*] And you, Caesonia, shall obey me. You must stand by me to the end. It will be marvellous, you'll see. Swear to stand by me, Caesonia.

CAESONIA

[*Wildly, between two gong-strokes.*] I needn't swear. You know I love you.

CALIGULA

[*In the same tone.*] You'll do all I tell you.

CAESONIA

All, all, Caligula—but do, please, stop . . .

CALIGULA

[*Still striking the gong.*] You will be cruel.

CAESONIA

[*Sobbing.*] Cruel.

CALIGULA

[*Still beating the gong.*] Cold and ruthless.

CAESONIA

Ruthless.

CALIGULA

And you will suffer, too.

CAESONIA

Yes, yes—oh, no, please . . . I'm—I'm going mad, I think! Some PATRICIANS enter, followed by members of the PALACE STAFF. All look bewildered and perturbed. CALIGULA bangs the gong for the last time, raises his mallet, swings round and summons them in a shrill, half-crazy voice.

CALIGULA

Come here. All of you. Nearer. Nearer still. [*He is quivering with impatience.*] Your Emperor commands you to come nearer. [*They come forward, pale with terror.*] Quickly. And you, Caesonia, come beside me. [*He takes her hand, leads her to the mirror and with a wild sweep of his mallet effaces a reflection on its surface. Then gives a sudden laugh.*] All gone. You see, my dear? An end of memories; no more masks. Nothing, nobody left. Nobody? No, that's not true. Look, Caesonia. Come here, all of you, and look . . . He plants himself in front of the mirror in a grotesque attitude.

CAESONIA

[*Staring, horrified, at the mirror.*] Caligula!

CALIGULA lays a finger on the glass. His gaze steadies abruptly and when he speaks his voice has a new, proud ardour.

CALIGULA

Yes . . . Caligula.

CURTAIN

SCIPIO

He made my mind up for me when he had my father put to death.

FIRST PATRICIAN

Well? Can you still hesitate?

A KNIGHT

No. We're with you. He's transferred our stalls at the Circus to the public, and egged us on to fight with the rabble—just to have a pretext for punishing us, of course.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

He's a coward.

SECOND PATRICIAN

A bully.

THIRD PATRICIAN

A buffoon.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

He's impotent—that's his trouble, I should say.

A scene of wild confusion follows, weapons are brandished, a table is overturned, and there is a general rush towards the door. Just at this moment CHEREA strolls in, composed as usual, and checks their onrush.

CHEREA

What's all this about? Where are you going?

A PATRICIAN

To the Palace.

CHEREA

Ah, yes. And I can guess why. But do you think you'll be allowed to enter?

THE PATRICIAN

There's no question of asking leave.

CHEREA

Lepidus, would you kindly shut that door? [*The door is shut. CHEREA goes to the upturned table and seats himself on*

a corner of it. The others turn towards him.] It's not so simple as you think, my friends. You're afraid, but fear can't take the place of courage and deliberation. In short, you're acting too hastily.

A KNIGHT

If you're not with us, go. But keep your mouth shut.

CHEREA

I suspect I'm with you. But make no mistake. Not for the same reasons.

A VOICE

That's enough idle talk.

CHEREA

[Standing up.] I agree. Let's get down to facts. But, first, let me make myself clear. Though I am *with* you, I'm not *for* you. That, indeed, is why I think you're going about it the wrong way. You haven't taken your enemy's measure; that's obvious, since you attribute petty motives to him. But there's nothing petty about Caligula, and you're riding for a fall. You'd be better placed to fight him if you would try to see him as he really is.

A VOICE

We see him as he is—a crazy tyrant.

CHEREA

No. We've had experience of mad emperors. But this one isn't mad enough. And what I loathe in him is this: that he knows what he wants.

FIRST PATRICIAN

And we, too, know it; he wants to murder us all.

CHEREA

You're wrong. Our deaths are only a side-issue. He's putting his power at the service of a loftier, deadlier passion; and it imperils everything we hold most sacred. True, it's not the first time Rome has seen a man wielding un-

ACT II]

CALIGULA

limited power; but it's the first time he sets no limit to his use of it, and counts mankind, and the world we know, for nothing. That's what appals me in Caligula; that's what I want to fight. To lose one's life is no great matter; when the time comes I'll have the courage to lose mine. But what's intolerable is to see one's life being drained of meaning, to be told there's no reason for existing. A man can't live without some reason for living.

FIRST PATRICIAN

Revenge is a good reason.

CHEREA

Yes, and I propose to share it with you. But I'd have you know that it's not on your account, or to help you to avenge your petty humiliations. No, if I join forces with you, it's to combat a big idea—an ideal, if you like—whose triumph would mean the end of everything. I can endure your being made a mock of, but I cannot endure Caligula's carrying out his theories to the end. He is converting his philosophy into corpses and—unfortunately for us—it's a philosophy that's logical from start to finish. And where one can't refute, one strikes.

A VOICE

Yes. We must *act*.

CHEREA

We must take action, I agree. But a frontal attack's quite useless when one is fighting an imperial madman in the full flush of his power. You can take arms against a vulgar tyrant, but cunning is needed to fight down disinterested malice. You can only urge it on to follow its bent, and bide your time until its logic founders in sheer lunacy. As you see, I prefer to be quite frank, and I warn you I'll be with you only for a time. Afterwards, I shall do nothing to advance your interests; all I wish is to regain some peace of mind in a world that has regained a meaning. What

spurs me on is not ambition but fear, my very reasonable fear of that inhuman vision in which my life means no more than a speck of dust.

FIRST PATRICIAN

[*Approaching him.*] I have an inkling of what you mean, Cherea. Anyhow, the great thing is that you, too, feel that the whole fabric of society is threatened. You, gentlemen, agree with me, I take it, that our ruling motive is of a moral order. Family life is breaking down, men are losing their respect for honest work, a wave of immorality is sweeping the country. Who of us can be deaf to the appeal of our ancestral piety in its hour of danger? Fellow-conspirators, will you tolerate a state of things in which patricians are forced to run, like slaves, beside the Emperor's litter?

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Will you allow them to be addressed as "darling"?

A VOICE

And have their wives snatched from them?

ANOTHER VOICE

And their money?

ALL TOGETHER

No!

FIRST PATRICIAN

Cherea, your advice is good, and you did well to calm our passion. The time is not yet ripe for action; the masses would still be against us. Will you join us in watching for the best moment to strike—and strike hard?

CHEREA

Yes—and meanwhile let Caligula follow his dream. Or, rather, let's actively encourage him to carry out his wildest plans. Let's put method into his madness. And then, at last, a day will come when he's alone, a lonely man in an empire of the dead and kinsmen of the dead.

ACT II]

CALIGULA

A general uproar. Trumpet-calls outside. Then silence, but for whispers of a name: "CALIGULA!" CALIGULA enters with CAESONIA, followed by HELICON and some soldiers. Dumb-show. CALIGULA halts and gazes at the conspirators. Without a word he moves from one to the other, straightens a buckle on one man's shoulder, steps back to contemplate another, sweeps them with his gaze, then draws his hand over his eyes and walks out, still without a word.

CAESONIA
[Ironically, pointing to the disorder of the room.] Were you having a fight?

CHEREA
Yes, we were fighting.
CAESONIA
[In the same tone.] Really? Might I know what you were fighting about?

CHEREA
About . . . nothing in particular.

CAESONIA
Ah? Then it isn't true.

CHEREA
What isn't true?

CAESONIA
You were *not* fighting.
CHEREA
Have it your own way. We weren't fighting.

CAESONIA
[Smiling.] Perhaps you'd do better to tidy up the place. Caligula hates untidiness.

HELICON
[To the OLD PATRICIAN.] You'll end by making him do something out of character.

THE OLD PATRICIAN
Pardon . . . I don't follow. What have we done to him?

HELICON

Nothing. Just nothing. It's fantastic being futile to that point; enough to get on anybody's nerves. Try to put yourselves in Caligula's place. [*A short pause.*] I see; doing a bit of plotting, weren't you now?

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Really, that's too absurd. I hope Caligula doesn't imagine . . .

HELICON

He doesn't imagine. He *knows*. But, I suppose, at bottom, he rather wants it . . . Well, we'd better set to tidying up. *All get busy.* CALIGULA *enters and watches them.*

CALIGULA

[*To the OLD PATRICIAN.*] Good day, darling. [*To the others.*] Gentlemen, I'm on my way to an execution. But I thought I'd drop in at your place, Cherea, for a light meal. I've given orders to have food brought here for all of us. But send for your wives first. [*A short silence.*] Rufius should thank his stars that I've been seized with hunger. [*Confidentially.*] Rufius, I may tell you, is the knight who's going to be executed. [*Another short silence.*] What's this? None of you asks me why I've sentenced him to death? [*No one speaks. Meanwhile slaves lay the table and bring food.*] Good for you! I see you're growing quite intelligent. [*He nibbles an olive.*] It has dawned on you that a man needn't have done anything for him to die. [*He stops eating and gazes at his guests with a twinkle in his eye.*] Soldiers, I am proud of you. [*Three or four women enter.*] Good! Let's take our places. Anyhow. No order of precedence to-day. [*All are seated.*] There's no denying it, that fellow Rufius is in luck. But I wonder if he appreciates this short reprieve. A few hours gained on death, why, they're worth their weight in gold! [*He begins eating; the others follow suit. It becomes clear that CALIGULA'S table manners are deplorable. There is no need for him to flick his olive stones*

ACT II]

CALIGULA

on to his neighbours' plates, or to spit out bits of gristle over the dish, or to pick his teeth with his nails, or to scratch his head furiously. However, he indulges in these practices throughout the meal, without the least compunction. At one moment he stops eating, stares at LEPIDUS, one of the guests, and says roughly] You're looking grumpy, Lepidus. I wonder, can it be because I had your son killed?

LEPIDUS

[Thickly.] Certainly not, Caius. Quite the contrary.

CALIGULA

[Beaming on him.] "Quite the contrary!" It's always nice to see a face that hides the secrets of the heart. Your face is sad. But what about your heart? Quite the contrary—isn't that so, Lepidus?

LEPIDUS

[Doggedly.] Quite the contrary, Caesar.

CALIGULA

[More and more enjoying the situation.] Really, Lepidus, there's no one I like better than you. Now let's have a laugh together, my dear friend. Tell me a funny story.

LEPIDUS

[Who has overrated his endurance.] Please . . .

CALIGULA

Good! Very good! Then it's I who'll tell the story. But you'll laugh, won't you, Lepidus? [With a glint of malice.] If only for the sake of your other son. [Smiling again.] In any case, as you've just told us, you're not in a bad humour. [He takes a drink, then says in the tone of a teacher prompting a pupil] Quite . . . quite the . . .

LEPIDUS

[Wearily.] Quite the contrary, Caesar.

CALIGULA

Splendid! [*Drinks again.*] Now listen. [*In a gentle, far-away tone.*] Once upon a time there was a poor young emperor whom nobody loved. He loved Lepidus and, to root out of his heart his love for Lepidus, he had his youngest son killed. [*In a brisker tone.*] Needless to say, there's not a word of truth in it. Still it's a funny story, eh? But you're not laughing. Nobody's laughing. Now listen! [*In a burst of anger.*] I insist on everybody's laughing. You, Lepidus, shall lead the chorus. Stand up, every one of you, and laugh. [*He thumps the table.*] Do you hear what I say? I wish to see you laughing, all of you. [*All rise to their feet. During this scene all the players, CALIGULA and CAESONIA excepted, behave like marionettes in a puppet-play. CALIGULA sinks back on his couch, beaming with delight, and bursts into a fit of laughter.*] Oh, Caesonia! Just look at them! The game is up; honour, respectability, the wisdom of the nations, gone with the wind! The wind of fear has blown them all away. Fear, Caesonia—don't you agree?—is a noble emotion, pure and simple, self-sufficient, like no other; it draws its patent of nobility straight from the guts. [*He strokes his forehead and drinks again. In a friendly tone.*] Well, well, let's change the subject. What have you to say, Cherea? You've been very silent.

CHEREA

I'm quite ready to speak, Caius. When you give me leave.

CALIGULA

Excellent. Then—keep silent. I'd rather have a word from our friend Mucius.

MUCIUS

[*Reluctantly.*] As you will, Caius.

CALIGULA

Then tell us something about your wife. And begin by sending her to this place, on my right. [*MUCIUS' WIFE seats herself beside CALIGULA.*] Well, Mucius? We're waiting.

ACT II]

CALIGULA

MUCIUS

[*Hardly knowing what he says.*] My wife . . . but . . . I'm very fond of her.

General laughter.

CALIGULA

Why, of course, my friend, of course. But how ordinary of you! So unoriginal! [*He is leaning towards her, tickling her shoulder playfully with his tongue.*] By the way, when I came in just now, you were hatching a plot, weren't you? A nice bloody little plot?

OLD PATRICIAN

Oh, Caius, how can you . . . ?

CALIGULA

It doesn't matter in the least, my pet. Old age will be served. I shan't take it seriously. Not one of you has the spunk for an heroic act . . . Ah, it's just come to my mind, I have some affairs of state to settle. But, first, I've a little natural craving to relieve.

He rises and leads MUCIUS' WIFE into an adjoining room. MUCIUS starts up from his seat.

CAESONIA

[*Amiably.*] Please, Mucius. Will you pour me out another glass of this excellent wine. [MUCIUS complies; his movement of revolt is quelled. Everyone looks embarrassed. Chairs creak noisily. The ensuing conversation is in a strained tone. CAESONIA turns to CHEREA.] Now, Cherea, suppose you tell me why you people were fighting just now?

CHEREA

[*Coolly.*] With pleasure, my dear Caesonia. Our quarrel arose from a discussion whether poetry should be blood-thirsty or not.

CAESONIA

An interesting problem. Somewhat beyond my feminine comprehension, of course. Still it surprises me that your passion for art should make you come to blows.

CHEREA

[*In the same rather stilted tone.*] That I can well understand. But I remember Caligula's telling me the other day that all true passion has a spice of cruelty.

CAESONIA

[*Helping herself from the dish in front of her.*] There's truth in that. Don't you agree, gentlemen?

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Ah, yes. Caligula has a rare insight into the secret places of the heart.

FIRST PATRICIAN

And how eloquently he spoke just now of courage!

SECOND PATRICIAN

Really he should put his ideas into writing. They would be most instructive.

CHEREA

And, what's more, it would keep him busy. It's obvious he needs something to occupy his leisure.

CAESONIA

[*Still eating.*] You'll be pleased to hear that Caligula shares your views; he's working on a book. Quite a big one, I believe.

CALIGULA enters, accompanied by MUCIUS' WIFE.

CALIGULA

Mucius, I return your wife, with many thanks. But excuse me, I've some orders to give.

He hurries out. MUCIUS has gone pale and risen to his feet.

CAESONIA

[*To MUCIUS, who is standing.*] This book of his will certainly rank amongst our Latin classics. Are you listening, Mucius?

MUCIUS

[*His eyes still fixed on the door by which CALIGULA went out.*] Yes. And what's the book about, Caesonia?

ACT II]

CALIGULA

CAESONIA

[*Indifferently.*] Oh, it's above my head, you know.

CHEREA

May we assume it deals with the murderous power of poetry?

CAESONIA

Yes, something of that sort, I understand.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

[*Cheerfully.*] Well anyhow, as our friend Cherea said, it will keep him busy.

CAESONIA

Yes, my love. But I'm afraid there's one thing you won't like quite so much about this book, and that's its title.

CHEREA

What is it?

CAESONIA

"Cold Steel."

CALIGULA *hurries in.*

CALIGULA

Excuse me, but I've some urgent public work in hand. [*To the INTENDANT.*] Intendant, you are to close the public granaries. I have signed a decree to that effect; you will find it in my study.

INTENDANT

But, sire . . .

CALIGULA

Famine begins to-morrow.

INTENDANT

But . . . but heaven knows what may happen—perhaps a revolution.

CALIGULA

[*Firmly and deliberately.*] I repeat; famine begins to-morrow. We all know what famine means—a national catastrophe. Well, to-morrow there will be a catastrophe,

and I shall end it when I choose. After all, I haven't so many ways of proving I am free. One is always free at someone else's expense. Absurd perhaps, but so it is. *With a keen glance at MUCIUS.*] Apply this principle to your jealousy—and you'll understand better. *[In a meditative tone.]* Still, what an ugly thing is jealousy! A disease of vanity and the imagination. One pictures one's wife . . . *[MUCIUS clenches his fists and opens his mouth to speak. Before he can get a word out, CALIGULA cuts in.]* Now, gentlemen, let's go on with our meal . . . Do you know, we've been doing quite a lot of work, with Helicon's assistance? Putting the final touches to a little monograph on execution—about which you will have much to say.

HELICON

Assuming we ask your opinion.

CALIGULA

Why not be generous, Helicon, and let them into our little secrets? Come now, give them a sample. Section Three, first paragraph.

HELICON

[Standing, declaims in a droning voice.] "Execution relieves and liberates. It is universal, tonic, just in precept and in practice. A man dies because he is guilty. A man is guilty because he is one of Caligula's subjects. Now all men are Caligula's subjects. Ergo, all men are guilty and shall die. It is only a matter of time and patience."

CALIGULA

[Laughing.] There's logic for you, don't you agree? That bit about "patience" was rather neat, wasn't it? Allow me to tell you, that's the quality I most admire in you . . . your patience. Now, gentlemen, you can disperse. Cherea doesn't need your presence any longer. Caesonia, I wish you to stay. You too, Lepidus. Also our old friend Mereia. I want to have a little talk with you about our National

ACT III

CALIGULA

Brothel. It's not functioning too well; in fact, I'm quite concerned about it.

The others file out slowly. CALIGULA follows MUCIUS with his eyes.

CHEREA

At your orders, Caius. But what's the trouble? Are the staff unsatisfactory?

CALIGULA

No, but the takings are falling off.

MEREIA

Then you should raise the entrance fee.

CALIGULA

There, Mereia, you missed a golden opportunity of keeping your mouth shut. You're too old to be interested in the subject, and I don't want your opinion.

MEREIA

Then why ask me to stay?

CALIGULA

Because, presently, I may require some cool, dispassionate advice.

MEREIA moves away.

CHEREA

If you wish to hear my views on the subject, Caius, I'd say, neither coolly nor dispassionately, that it would be a blunder to raise the scale of charges.

CALIGULA

Obviously. What's needed is a bigger turnover. I've explained my plan of campaign to Caesonia, and she will tell you all about it. Personally, I've had too much wine, I'm feeling sleepy.

He lies down, and closes his eyes.

CAESONIA

It's very simple. Caligula is creating a new order of merit.

CHEREA

Sorry, I don't see the connection.

CAESONIA

No? But there is one. It will be called the Badge of Civic Merit and awarded to those who have patronized Caligula's National Brothel most assiduously.

CHEREA

A brilliant idea!

CAESONIA

I agree. Oh, I forgot to mention that the Badge will be conferred each month, after checking the admission tickets. Any citizen who has not obtained the Badge within twelve months will be exiled, or executed.

CHEREA

Why "or executed"?

CAESONIA

Because Caligula says it doesn't matter which—but it's important he should have the right of choosing.

CHEREA

Bravo! The Public Treasury will wipe out its deficit in no time.

CALIGULA *has half-opened his eyes and is watching old MEREIA who, standing in a corner, has produced a small flask and is sipping its contents.*

CALIGULA

[*Still lying on the couch.*] What's that you're drinking, Mereia?

MEREIA

It's for my asthma, Caius.

CALIGULA

[*Rises and, thrusting the others aside, goes up to MEREIA and sniffs his mouth.*] No, it's an antidote.

ACT II]

CALIGULA

MEREIA

What an idea, Caius! You must be joking. I have choking fits at night and I've been in the doctor's hands for months.

CALIGULA

So you're afraid of being poisoned?

CHEREA

My asthma . . .

CALIGULA

No. Why beat about the bush? You're afraid I'll poison you. You suspect me. You're keeping an eye on me.

MEREIA

Good heavens, no!

CALIGULA

You suspect me. I'm not to be trusted, eh?

MEREIA

Caius!

CALIGULA

[*Roughly.*] Answer! [*In a cool, judicial tone.*] If you take an antidote, it follows that you credit me with the intention of poisoning you. Q.E.D.

MEREIA

Yes . . . I mean . . . no!

CALIGULA

And thinking I intend to poison you, you take steps to frustrate my plan. [*He falls silent. Meanwhile CAESONIA and CHEREA have moved away, back stage. LEPIDUS is watching the speakers with an air of consternation.*] That makes two crimes, Mereia, and a dilemma from which you can't escape. Either I have no wish to cause your death; in which case you are unjustly suspecting me, your emperor. Or else I desire your death; in which case, vermin that you are, you're trying to thwart my will. [*Another silence.*] CALIGULA contemplates the old man gloatingly. Well, Mereia, what have you to say to my logic?

MEREIA

It . . . it's sound enough, Caius. Only it doesn't apply to the case.

CALIGULA

A third crime. You take me for a fool. Now sit down and listen carefully. [*To LEPIDUS.*] Let everyone sit down. [*To MEREIA.*] Of these three crimes only one does you honour; the second one—because by crediting me with a certain wish and presuming to oppose it you are deliberately defying me. You are a rebel, a leader of revolt. And that needs courage. [*Sadly.*] I've a great liking for you, Mereia. And that is why you'll be condemned for crime number two, and not for either of the others. You shall die nobly, a rebel's death. [*While he talks MEREIA is shrinking together on his chair.*] Don't thank me. It's quite natural. Here. [*Holds out a phial. His tone is amiable.*] Drink this poison. [*MEREIA shakes his head. He is sobbing violently. CALIGULA shows signs of impatience.*] Don't waste time. Take it. [*MEREIA makes a feeble attempt to escape. But CALIGULA with a wild leap is on him, catches him in the centre of the stage and after a brief struggle pins him down on a low couch. He forces the phial between his lips and smashes it with a blow of his fist. After some convulsive movements MEREIA dies. His face is streaming with blood and tears. CALIGULA rises, wipes his hands absentmindedly, then hands MEREIA'S flask to CAESONIA.*] What was it? An antidote?

CAESONIA

[*Calmly.*] No, Caligula. A remedy for asthma.
A short silence.

CALIGULA

[*Gazing down at MEREIA.*] No matter. It all comes to the same thing in the end. A little sooner, a little later . . .
He goes out hurriedly, still wiping his hands.

LEPIDUS

[*In a horrified tone.*] What . . . what shall we do?

ACT II]

CALIGULA

CAESONIA

[Coolly.] Remove that body to begin with, I should say. It's rather a beastly sight.

CHEREA and LEPIDUS drag the body into the wing.

LEPIDUS

[To CHEREA.] We must act quickly.

CHEREA

We'll need to be two hundred.

Young SCIPIO enters. Seeing CAESONIA, he makes as if to leave.

CAESONIA

Come.

SCIPIO

What do you want?

CAESONIA

Come nearer. [She pushes up his chin and looks him in the eyes. A short silence. Then, in a calm, unemotional voice.] He killed your father, didn't he?

SCIPIO

Yes.

CAESONIA

Do you hate him?

SCIPIO

Yes.

CAESONIA

And you'd like to kill him?

SCIPIO

Yes.

CAESONIA

[Withdrawing her hand.] But—why tell me this?

SCIPIO

Because I fear nobody. Killing him or being killed—either way out will do. And anyhow you won't betray me.

CAESONIA

That's so. I shan't betray you. But I want to tell you something—or, rather, I'd like to speak to what is best in you.

SCIPIO

What's best in me is—my hatred.

CAESONIA

Please listen carefully to what I'm going to say. It may sound hard to grasp, but it's as clear as daylight, really. And it's something that would bring about the one real revolution in this world of ours, if people would only take it in.

SCIPIO

Yes? What is it?

CAESONIA

Wait! Try to call up a picture of your father's death, of the agony on his face as they were tearing out his tongue. Think of the blood streaming from his mouth, and recall his screams, like a tortured animal's.

SCIPIO

Yes.

CAESONIA

And now think of Caligula.

SCIPIO

[*His voice rough with hatred.*] Yes.

CAESONIA

Now listen. *Try to understand him.*
She goes out, leaving SCIPIO *gaping after her in bewilderment.* HELICON *enters.*

HELICON

Caligula will be here in a moment. Suppose you go for your meal, young poet?

SCIPIO

Helicon, help me.

ACT II]

CALIGULA

HELICON

Too dangerous, my lamb. And poetry means nothing to me.

SCIPIO

You can help me. You know . . . so many things.

HELICON

I know that the days go by—and growing boys should have their meals on time . . . I know, too, that you could kill Caligula . . . and he wouldn't greatly mind it.

HELICON *goes out.* CALIGULA *enters.*

CALIGULA

Ah, it's you, Scipio. [*He pauses. One has the impression that he is somewhat embarrassed.*] It's quite a long time since I saw you last. [*Slowly approaches* SCIPIO.] What have you been up to? Writing more poems, I suppose. Might I see your latest composition?

SCIPIO

[*Likewise ill at ease, torn between hatred and some less defined emotion.*] Yes, Ceasar, I've written some more poems.

CALIGULA

On what subject?

SCIPIO

Oh, on nothing in particular. Well, on Nature in a way.

CALIGULA

A fine theme. And a vast one. And what has Nature done for you?

SCIPIO

[*Pulling himself together, in a somewhat truculent tone.*] It consoles me for not being Caesar.

CALIGULA

Really? And do you think Nature could console me for being Caesar?

SCIPIO

[*In the same tone.*] Why not? Nature has healed worse wounds than that.

CALIGULA

[*In a curiously young, unaffected voice.*] Wounds, you said? There was anger in your voice. Because I put your father to death? . . . That word you used—if you only knew how apt it is! My wounds! [*In a different tone.*] Well, well, there's nothing like hatred for developing the intelligence.

SCIPIO

[*Stiffly.*] I answered your question about Nature.

CALIGULA *sits down, gazes at SCIPIO, then brusquely grips his wrists and forces him to stand up. He takes the young man's face between his hands.*

CALIGULA

Recite your poem to me, please.

SCIPIO

No, please, don't ask me that.

CALIGULA

Why not?

SCIPIO

I haven't got it on me.

CALIGULA

Can't you remember it?

SCIPIO

No.

CALIGULA

Anyhow you can tell me what it's about.

SCIPIO

[*Still hostile; reluctantly.*] I spoke of a . . . a certain harmony . . .

CALIGULA

[*Breaking in; in a pensive voice.*] . . . between one's feet and the earth.

ACT II]

CALIGULA

SCIPIO

[*Looking surprised.*] Yes, it's almost that . . . and it tells of the wavy outline of the Roman hills and the sudden thrill of peace that twilight brings to them . . .

CALIGULA

And the cries of swifts thridding the green dusk.

SCIPIO

[*Yielding more and more to his emotion.*] Yes, yes! And that fantastic moment when the sky all flushed with red and gold swings round and shows its other side, spangled with stars.

CALIGULA

And the faint smell of smoke and trees and streams that mingles with the rising mist.

SCIPIO

[*In a sort of ecstasy.*] Yes, and the chirr of crickets, the coolness veining the warm air, the rumble of carts and the farmers' shouts, dogs barking . . .

CALIGULA

And the roads drowned in shadow winding through the olive-groves . . .

SCIPIO

Yes, yes. That's it, exactly . . . But how did you know?

CALIGULA

[*Drawing SCIPIO to his breast.*] I wonder! Perhaps because the same eternal truths appeal to us both. And perhaps, too, because it's easy to share emotions—provided they are vague enough.

SCIPIO

[*Quivering with excitement, burying his head on CALIGULA'S breast.*] Anyhow, what matter! All I know is that everything I feel or think of turns to love.

CALIGULA

[*Stroking his hair.*] That, Scipio, is a privilege of noble hearts—and how I wish I could share your . . . your limpidity! But my appetite for life's too keen; Nature can never sate it. You belong to quite another world, and you can't understand. You are single-minded for good; and I am single-minded—for evil.

SCIPIO

I *do* understand.

CALIGULA

No. There's something deep down in me—an abyss of silence, a pool of stagnant water, rotting weeds. [*With an abrupt change of manner.*] Your poem sounds very good indeed, but, if you really want my opinion . . .

SCIPIO

[*His head on CALIGULA's breast, murmurs*] Yes?

CALIGULA

All that's a bit . . . anaemic.

SCIPIO

[*Recoiling abruptly, as if stung by a serpent, and gazing, horrified, at CALIGULA, he cries hoarsely*] Oh, you brute! You loathsome brute! You've fooled me again. I know! You were playing a trick on me, weren't you? And now you're gloating over your success.

CALIGULA

[*With a hint of sadness.*] There's truth in what you say. I *was* playing a part.

SCIPIO

[*In the same indignant tone.*] What a foul, black heart you have! And how all that wickedness and hatred must make you suffer!

CALIGULA

[*Gently.*] That's enough.

ACT II]

CALIGULA

SCIPIO

How I loathe you! And how I pity you!

CALIGULA

[*Angrily.*] Enough, I tell you.

SCIPIO

And how horrible a loneliness like yours must be!

CALIGULA

[*In a rush of anger, gripping the boy by the collar, and shaking him.*] Loneliness! What do you know of it? Only the loneliness of poets and weaklings. You prate of loneliness, but you don't realize that one is *never* alone. Always we are attended by the same load of the future and the past. Those we have killed are always with us. But *they* are no great trouble. It's those we have loved, those who loved us and whom we did not love; regrets, desires, bitterness and sweetness, whores and gods, the gang celestial! Always, always with us! [*He releases SCIPIO and moves back to his former place.*] Alone! Ah, if only in this loneliness, this ghoul-haunted wilderness of mine, I could know, but for a moment, real solitude, real silence, the throbbing stillness of a tree! [*Sitting down, in an access of fatigue.*] Solitude? No, Scipio, mine is full of gnashings of teeth, hideous with jarring sounds and voices. And when I am with the women I make mine and darkness falls on us and I think, now my body's had its fill, that I can feel myself my own at last, poised between death and life—ah, then my solitude is fouled by the stale smell of pleasure from the woman sprawling at my side.

A long silence. CALIGULA seems weary and despondent. SCIPIO moves behind him and approaches hesitantly. He slowly stretches out a hand towards him, from behind, and places it on his shoulder. Without looking round, CALIGULA places his hand on SCIPIO'S.

SCIPIO

All men have a secret solace. It helps them to endure, and they turn to it when life has wearied them beyond enduring.

CALIGULA

Yes, Scipio.

SCIPIO

Have you nothing of the kind in your life, no refuge, no mood that makes the tears well up, no consolation?

CALIGULA

Yes, I have something of the kind.

SCIPIO

What is it?

CALIGULA

[*Very quietly.*] Scorn.

CURTAIN

ACT III

Before the curtain rises a rhythmic clash of cymbals and the thudding of a drum have been coming from the stage, and when it goes up we see a curtained-off booth, with a small proscenium in front, such as strolling players use at country fairs for an exhibition turn. On the little stage are CAESONIA and HELICON, flanked by cymbal-players. Seated on benches, with their backs to the audience, are some PATRICIANS and young SCIPIO.

HELICON

[In the tone of a showman at a fair.] Walk up! Walk up! *[A clash of cymbals.]* Once more the gods have come to earth. They have assumed the human form of our heaven-born emperor, known to men as Caligula. Draw near, mortals of common clay; a holy miracle is taking place before your eyes. By a divine dispensation peculiar to Caligula's hallowed reign, the secrets of the gods will be revealed to you. *[Cymbals.]*

CAESONIA

Come, gentlemen. Come and adore him—and don't forget to give your alms. To-day heaven and its mysteries are on show, at a price to suit every pocket.

HELICON

For all to see, the secrets of Olympus, revelations in high places, featuring gods in undress, their little plots and pranks. Step this way! The whole truth about your gods! *Cymbals.*

CAESONIA

Adore him, and give your alms. Come near, gentlemen.
The show's beginning.

Cymbals. SLAVES are placing various objects on the platform.

HELICON

An epoch-making reproduction of the life celestial, warranted authentic in every detail. For the first time the pomp and splendour of the gods are presented to the Roman public. You will relish our novel, breathtaking effects: flashes of lightning [*SLAVES light Greek fires*], peals of thunder [*they roll a barrel filled with stones*], the divine event on its triumphal way. Now watch with all your eyes. *He draws aside the curtain. Grotesquely attired as Venus, CALIGULA beams down on them from a pedestal.*

CALIGULA

I'm Venus to-day.

CAESONIA

Now for the adoration. Bow down. [*All but SCIPIO bend their heads.*] And repeat after me the litany of Venus yclept Caligula.

"Our Lady of pangs and pleasures . . ."

THE PATRICIANS

"Our Lady of pangs and pleasures . . ."

CAESONIA

"Born of the waves, bitter and bright with seafoam . . ."

THE PATRICIANS

"Born of the waves, bitter and bright with seafoam . . ."

CAESONIA

"O Queen whose gifts are laughter and regrets . . ."

THE PATRICIANS

"O Queen whose gifts are laughter and regrets . . ."

CAESONIA

"Rancours and raptures . . ."

THE PATRICIANS

"Rancours and raptures . . ."

CAESONIA

"Teach us the indifference that kindles love anew . . ."

THE PATRICIANS

"Teach us the indifference that kindles love anew . . ."

CAESONIA

"Make known to us the truth about this world—which is that it has none . . ."

THE PATRICIANS

"Make known to us the truth about this world—which is that it has none . . ."

CAESONIA

"And grant us strength to live up to this verity of verities."

THE PATRICIANS

"And grant us strength to live up to this verity of verities."

CAESONIA

Now, pause.

THE PATRICIANS

Now, pause.

CAESONIA

[*After a short silence.*] "Bestow your gifts on us, and shed on our faces the light of your impartial cruelty, your wanton hatred; unfold above our eyes your arms laden with flowers and murders . . ."

THE PATRICIANS

" . . . your arms laden with flowers and murders."

CAESONIA

"Welcome your wandering children home, to the bleak sanctuary of your heartless, thankless love. Give us your

passions without object, your griefs devoid of reason, your raptures that lead nowhere . . .”

THE PATRICIANS

“ . . . your raptures that lead nowhere . . . ”

CAESONIA

[*Raising her voice.*] “O Queen, so empty yet so ardent, inhuman yet so earthly, make us drunk with the wine of your equivalence, and surfeit us for ever in the brackish darkness of your heart.”

THE PATRICIANS

“Make us drunk with the wine of your equivalence, and surfeit us for ever in the brackish darkness of your heart.”
When the PATRICIANS have said the last response, CALIGULA, who until now has been quite motionless, snorts and rises.

CALIGULA

[*In a stentorian voice.*] Granted, my children. Your prayer is heard. [*He squats cross-legged on the pedestal. One by one the PATRICIANS make obeisance, deposit their alms, and line up on the right. The last, in his flurry, forgets to make an offering. CALIGULA bounds to his feet.*] Steady! Steady on! Come here, my lad. Worship’s very well, but almsgiving is better. Thank you, We are appeased. Ah, if the gods had no wealth other than the love you mortals give them, they’d be as poor as poor Caligula. Now, gentlemen, you may go, and spread abroad the glad tidings of the miracle you’ve been allowed to witness. You have seen Venus, seen her godhead with your fleshly eyes, and Venus herself has spoken to you. Go, most favoured gentlemen. [*The PATRICIANS begin to move away.*] Just a moment. When you leave, mind you take the exit on your left. I have posted sentries in the others, with orders to kill you.
The PATRICIANS file out hastily, in some disorder. The SLAVES and MUSICIANS leave the stage.]

HELICON

[*Pointing a monitory finger at SCIPIO.*] Naughty boy, you've been playing the anarchist again.

SCIPIO

[*To CALIGULA.*] You spoke blasphemy, Caius.

CALIGULA

Blasphemy? What's that?

SCIPIO

You're befouling heaven, after bloodying the earth.

CALIGULA

How this youngster loves big words!

[*He stretches himself on a couch.*]

CAESONIA

[*Composedly.*] You should watch your tongue, my lad. At this moment men are dying in Rome for saying much less.

SCIPIO

Maybe—but I've resolved to tell Caligula the truth.

CAESONIA

Hark at him, Caligula! That was the one thing missing in your Empire—a bold young moralist.

CALIGULA

[*Giving SCIPIO a curious glance.*] Do you really believe in the gods, Scipio?

SCIPIO

No.

CALIGULA

Then I fail to follow. If you don't believe, why be so keen to scent out blasphemy?

SCIPIO

One may deny something without feeling called on to besmire it, or deprive others of the right of believing in it.

CALIGULA

But that's humility, the real thing, unless I'm much mistaken. Ah, my dear Scipio, how glad I am on your behalf—and a trifle envious, too. Humility's the one emotion I may never feel.

SCIPIO

It's not I you're envious of; it's the gods.

CALIGULA

If you don't mind, that will remain our secret—the great enigma of our reign. Really, you know, there's only one thing for which I might be blamed to-day—and that's this small advance I've made upon the path of freedom. For someone who loves power the rivalry of the gods is rather irksome. Well, I've proved to these imaginary gods that any man, without previous training, if he applies his mind to it, can play their absurd parts to perfection.

SCIPIO

That, Caius, is what I meant by blasphemy.

CALIGULA

No, Scipio, it's clear-sightedness. I've merely realized that there's only one way of getting even with the gods. All that's needed is to be as cruel as they.

SCIPIO

All that's needed is to play the tyrant.

CALIGULA

Tell me, my young friend. What exactly *is* a tyrant?

SCIPIO

A blind soul.

CALIGULA

That's a moot point. I should say the real tyrant is a who sacrifices a whole nation to his ideal or his ambition. But I have no ideal, and there's nothing left for me to

by way of power or glory. If I use this power of mine, it's to compensate.

SCIPIO

For what?

CALIGULA

For the hatred and stupidity of the gods.

SCIPIO

Hatred does not compensate for hatred. Power is no solution. Personally I know only one way of countering the hostility of the world we live in.

CALIGULA

Yes? And what is it?

SCIPIO

Poverty.

CALIGULA

[*Bending over his feet and scrutinizing his toes.*] I must try that, too.

SCIPIO

Meanwhile many men round you are dying.

CALIGULA

Oh, come! Not so many as all that. Do you know how many wars I've refused to embark on?

SCIPIO

No.

CALIGULA

Three. And do you know why I refused?

SCIPIO

Because the grandeur of Rome means nothing to you.

CALIGULA

No. Because I respect human life.

SCIPIO

You're joking, Caius.

CALIGULA

Or, anyhow, I respect it more than I respect military triumphs. But it's a fact that I don't respect it more than I respect my own life. And if I find killing easy, it's because dying isn't hard for me. No, the more I think about it, the surer I feel that I'm no tyrant.

SCIPIO

What matter, if it costs us quite as dear as if you were one?

CALIGULA

[*With a hint of petulance.*] If you had the least head for figures you'd know that the smallest war a tyrant—however level-headed he might be—indulged in would cost you a thousand times more than all my vagaries (shall we call them?) put together.

SCIPIO

Possibly. But at least there'd be *some* sense behind a war; it would be understandable—and to understand makes up for much.

CALIGULA

There's no understanding Fate; therefore I choose to play the part of Fate. I wear the foolish, unintelligible face of a professional god. And that is what the men who were here with you have learnt to adore.

SCIPIO

That, too, Caius, is blasphemy.

CALIGULA

No, Scipio, it's dramatic art. The great mistake you people make is not to take the drama seriously enough. If you did, you'd know that any man can play lead in the divine comedy and become a god. All he needs do is to harden his heart.

SCIPIO

You may be right, Caius. But I rather think you've

ACT III]

CALIGULA

everything that was needed to rouse up against you a legion of human gods, ruthless as yourself, who will drown in blood your godhead of a day.

CAESONIA

Really, Scipio!

CALIGULA

[*Peremptorily.*] No, don't stop him, Caesonia. Yes, Scipio, you spoke truer than you knew; I've done everything needed to that end. I find it hard to picture the event you speak of—but I sometimes dream it. And in all those faces and hatred, I see, and I rejoice to see, the only god I've worshipped on this earth; foul and craven as the human heart. [*Irritably.*] Now go. I've had enough of you, more than enough. [*In a different tone.*] I really must attend to my toe-nails; they're not nearly red enough, and I've no time to waste. [*All go, with the exception of HELICON. He hovers round CALIGULA, who is busy painting his toe-nails.*]
Helicon!

HELICON

Yes?

CALIGULA

Getting on with your task?

HELICON

What task?

CALIGULA

You know . . . the moon.

HELICON

Ah yes, the moon. . . . It's a matter of time and patience. But I'd like to have a word with you.

CALIGULA

I might have patience; only I have not much time. So you must make haste.

HELICON

I said I'd do my utmost. But, first, I have something to tell you. Very serious news.

CALIGULA

[*As if he has not heard.*] Mind you, I've had her already.

HELICON

Whom?

CALIGULA

The moon.

HELICON

Yes, yes . . . Now listen, please. Do you know there's a plot being hatched against your life?

CALIGULA

What's more, I had her thoroughly. Only two or three times, to be sure. Still, I had her all right.

HELICON

For the last hour I've been trying to tell you about it, only——

CALIGULA

It was last summer. I'd been gazing at her so long, and stroking her so often on the marble pillars in the gardens that evidently she'd come to understand.

HELICON

Please stop trifling, Caius. Even if you refuse to listen, it's my duty to tell you this. And if you shut your ears, it can't be helped.

CALIGULA

[*Varnishing his toe-nails.*] This varnish is no good at all. But, to come back to the moon—it was a cloudless August night. [HELICON *looks sulkily away, and keeps silence.*] She was coy, to begin with. I'd gone to bed. First she was blood-red, low on the horizon. Then she began rising, quicker and quicker, growing brighter and brighter all the while. And the higher she climbed, the paler she grew,

till she was like a milky pool in a dark wood rustling with stars. Slowly, shyly she approached, through the warm night-air, soft, light as gossamer, naked in beauty. She crossed the threshold of my room, glided to my bed, poured herself into it, and flooded me with her smiles and sheen. . . . No, really this new varnish is a failure. . . . So you see, Helicon, I can say, without boasting, that I've had her.

HELICON

Now will you listen, and learn the danger that's threatening you?

CALIGULA

[*Ceasing to fiddle with his toes, and gazing at him fixedly.*] All I want, Helicon, is—the moon. For the rest, I've always known what will kill me. I haven't yet exhausted all that is to keep me living. That's why I want the moon. And you must not return till you have secured her for me.

HELICON

Very well. . . . Now I'll do my duty and tell you what I've learnt. There's a plot against you. Cherea is the ringleader. I came across this tablet which tells you all you need to know. See, I put it here.

He places the tablet on one of the seats and moves away.

CALIGULA

Where are you off to, Helicon?

HELICON

[*From the threshold.*] To get the moon for you.

There is a mouse-like scratching at the opposite door.

CALIGULA swings round and sees the OLD PATRICIAN.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

[*Timidly.*] May I, Caius . . .

CALIGULA

[*Impatiently.*] Come in! Come in! [*Gazes at him.*] So, my pet, you've returned to have another look at Venus.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Well . . . no. It's not quite that. Ssh! Oh, sorry, Caius! I only wanted to say . . . You know I'm very, very devoted to you—and my one desire is to end my days in peace.

CALIGULA

Be quick, man. Get it out!

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Well, it's . . . it's like this. [*Hurriedly.*] It's terribly serious, that's what I meant to say.

CALIGULA

No, it isn't serious.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

But—I don't follow. *What* isn't serious?

CALIGULA

But what are we talking about, my love?

THE OLD PATRICIAN

[*Glancing nervously round the room.*] I mean to say . . . [*Wiggles, shuffles, then bursts out with it.*] There's a plot afoot, against you.

CALIGULA

There! You see. Just as I said; it isn't serious.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

But, Caius, they mean to kill you.

CALIGULA

[*Approaching him and grasping his shoulders.*] Do you know why I can't believe you?

THE OLD PATRICIAN

[*Raising an arm, as if to take an oath.*] The gods bear witness, Caius, that . . .

CALIGULA

[*Gently but firmly pressing him back towards the door.*] Don't

swear. I particularly ask you not to swear. Listen, instead. Suppose it were true, what you are telling me—I'd have to assume you were betraying your friends, isn't that so?

THE OLD PATRICIAN

[*Flustered.*] Well, Caius, considering the deep affection I have for you . . .

CALIGULA

[*In the same tone as before.*] And I cannot assume *that*. I've always loathed baseness of that sort so profoundly that I could never restrain myself from having a betrayer put to death. But I know the man you are, my worthy friend. And I'm convinced you neither wish to play the traitor nor to die.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Certainly not, Caius. Most certainly not.

CALIGULA

So you see I was right in refusing to believe you. You wouldn't stoop to baseness, would you?

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Oh no, indeed!

CALIGULA

Nor betray your friends?

THE OLD PATRICIAN

I need hardly tell you that, Caius.

CALIGULA

Therefore it follows that there isn't any plot. It was just a joke—between ourselves, rather a silly joke—what you've just been telling me, eh?

THE OLD PATRICIAN

[*Feebly.*] Yes, yes. A joke, merely a joke.

CALIGULA

Good. So now we know where we are. Nobody wants to kill me.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Nobody. That's it. Nobody at all.

CALIGULA

[*Drawing a deep breath; in measured tones.*] Then—leave me, sweetheart. A man of honour is an animal so rare in the present-day world that I couldn't bear the sight of one too long. I must be left alone to relish this unique experience. [*For some moments he gazes, without moving, at the tablet. He picks it up and reads it. Then, again, draws a deep breath. Then summons a PALACE GUARD.*]

CALIGULA

Bring Cherea to me. [*The man starts to leave.*] Wait! [*The man halts.*] Treat him politely. [*The man goes out. CALIGULA falls to pacing the room. After a while he approaches the mirror.*] You decided to be logical, didn't you, poor simpleton? Logic for ever! The question now is: Where will that take you? [*Ironically.*] Suppose the moon were brought here, everything would be different. That was the idea, wasn't it? Then the impossible would become possible, in a flash the Great Change come, and all things be transfigured. After all, why shouldn't Helicon bring it off? One night, perhaps, he'll catch her sleeping in a lake, and carry her here, trapped in a glistening net, all slimy with weeds and water, like a pale bloated fish drawn from the depths. Why not, Caligula? Why not, indeed? [*He casts a glance round the room.*] Fewer and fewer people round me; I wonder why. [*Addressing the mirror, in a muffled voice.*] Too many dead, too many dead—that makes an emptiness. . . . No, even if the moon were mine, I could not retrace my way. Even were those dead men thrilling again under the sun's caress, the murders wouldn't go back underground for that. [*Angrily.*] Logic, Caligula; follow where logic leads. Power to the uttermost; wilfulness without end. Ah, I'm the only man on earth to know the secret—that power

can never be complete without a total self-surrender to the dark impulse of one's destiny. No, there's no return. I must go on and on, until the consummation.

CHEREA enters. CALIGULA is slumped in his chair, the cloak drawn tightly round him.

CHEREA

You sent for me, Caius?

CALIGULA

[*Languidly.*] Yes, Cherea.

A short silence.

CHEREA

Have you anything particular to tell me?

CALIGULA

No, Cherea.

Another silence.

CHEREA

[*With a hint of petulance.*] Are you sure you really need my presence?

CALIGULA

Absolutely sure, Cherea. [*Another silence. Then, as if suddenly recollecting himself.*] I'm sorry for seeming so inhospitable. I was following up my thoughts, and— Now do sit down, we'll have a friendly little chat. I'm in a mood for some intelligent conversation. [CHEREA sits down. *For the first time since the play began, CALIGULA gives the impression of being his natural self.*] Do you think, Cherea, that it's possible for two men of much the same temperament and equal pride to talk to each other with complete frankness—if only once in their lives? Can they strip themselves naked, so to speak, and shed their prejudices, their private interests, the lies by which they live?

CHEREA

Yes, Caius, I think it possible. But I don't think you'd be capable of it.

CALIGULA

You're right. I only wished to know if you agreed with me. So let's wear our masks, and muster up our lies. And we'll talk as fencers fight, padded on all the vital parts. Tell me, Cherea, why don't you like me?

CHEREA

Because there's nothing likeable about you, Caius. Because such feelings can't be had to order. And because I understand you far too well. One cannot like an aspect of oneself which one always tries to keep concealed.

CALIGULA

But why is it you hate me?

CHEREA

There, Caius, you're mistaken. I do not hate you. I regard you as noxious and cruel, vain and selfish. But I cannot hate you, because I don't think you are happy. And I cannot scorn you, because I know you are no coward.

CALIGULA

Then why wish to kill me?

CHEREA

I've told you why; because I regard you as noxious, a constant menace. I like, and need, to feel secure. So do most men. They resent living in a world where the most preposterous fancy may at any moment become a reality, and the absurd transfix their lives, like a dagger in the heart. I feel as they do; I refuse to live in a topsy-turvy world. I want to know where I stand, and to stand secure.

CALIGULA

Security and logic don't go together.

CHEREA

Quite true. My plan of life may not be logical, but at least it's sound.

ACT III]

CALIGULA

CALIGULA

Go on.

CHEREA

There's no more to say. I'll be no party to your logic. I've a very different notion of my duties as a man. And I know that the majority of your subjects share my view. You outrage their deepest feelings. It's only natural that you should . . . disappear.

CALIGULA

I see your point, and it's legitimate enough. For most men, I grant you, it's obvious. But *you*, I should have thought, would have known better. You're an intelligent man, and given intelligence, one has a choice: either to pay its price or to disown it. Why do you shirk the issue and neither disown it nor consent to pay its price?

CHEREA

Because what I want is to live, and to be happy. Neither, to my mind, is possible if one pushes the absurd to its logical conclusions. As you see, I'm quite an ordinary sort of man. True, there are moments when, to feel free of them, I desire the death of those I love, or I hanker after women from whom the ties of family or friendship debar me. Were logic everything, I'd kill or fornicate on such occasions. But I consider that these passing fancies have no great importance. If everyone set to gratifying them, the world would be impossible to live in, and happiness, too, would go by the board. And these, I repeat, are the things that count, for me.

CALIGULA

So, I take it, you believe in some higher principle?

CHEREA

Certainly I believe that some actions are—shall I say?—more praiseworthy than others.

CALIGULA

And *I* believe that all are on an equal footing.

CHEREA

I know it, Caius, and that's why I don't hate you. I understand and, to a point, agree with you. But you're pernicious, and you've got to go.

CALIGULA

True enough. But why risk your life by telling me this?

CHEREA

Because others will take my place, and because I don't like lying.

A short silence.

CALIGULA

Cherea!

CHEREA

Yes, Caius?

CALIGULA

Do you think that two men of similar temperament and equal pride can, if only once in their lives, open their hearts to each other?

CHEREA

That, I believe, is what we've just been doing.

CALIGULA

Yes, Cherea. But you thought I was incapable of it.

CHEREA

I was wrong, Caius. I admit it, and I thank you. Now I await your sentence.

CALIGULA

My sentence? Ah, I see. [*Producing the tablet from under his cloak.*] You know what this is, Cherea?

CHEREA

I knew you had it.

CALIGULA

[*Passionately.*] You knew I had it! So your frankness was all a piece of play-acting. The two friends did *not* open their hearts to each other. Well, well! It's no great matter. Now we can stop playing at sincerity, and resume life on the old footing. But first I'll ask you to make just one more effort; to bear with my caprices and my tactlessness a little longer. Listen well, Cherea. This tablet is the one and only piece of evidence against you.

CHEREA

Caius, I'd rather go. I'm sick and tired of all these antics. Only too well I know them, and I've had enough. Let me go, please.

CALIGULA

[*In the same tense, passionate voice.*] No, stay. This tablet is the only evidence. Is that clear?

CHEREA

Evidence? I never knew you needed evidence to send a man to his death.

CALIGULA

That's true. Still, for once I wish to contradict myself. Nobody can object to that. It's so pleasant to contradict oneself occasionally; so restful. And I need rest, Cherea.

CHEREA

I don't follow . . . and, frankly, I've no taste for these subtleties.

CALIGULA

I know, Cherea, I know. You're not like me; you're an ordinary man, sound in mind and body. And naturally you've no desire for the extraordinary. [*With a burst of laughter.*] You want to live and to be happy. That's all!

CHEREA

I think, Caius, we'd better leave it at that. . . . Can I go?

CALIGULA

Not yet. A little patience, if you don't mind—I shall not keep you long. You see this thing—this piece of evidence? I choose to assume that I can't sentence you to death without it. That's my idea . . . and my repose. Well! See what becomes of evidence in an emperor's hands. [*He holds the tablet to a torch. CHEREA approaches. The torch is between them. The tablet begins to melt.*] You see, conspirator! The tablet's melting, and as it melts a look of innocence is dawning on your face. What a handsome forehead you have, Cherea! And how rare, how beautiful a sight is an innocent man! Admire my power. Even the gods cannot restore innocence without first punishing the culprit. But your emperor needs only a torch-flame to absolve you and give you a new lease of hope. So carry on, Cherea; follow out the noble precepts we've been hearing, wherever they may take you. Meanwhile your emperor awaits his repose. It's his way of living and being happy.

CHEREA *stares, dumbfounded, at CALIGULA. He makes a vague gesture, seems to understand, opens his mouth to speak—and walks abruptly away. Smiling, holding the tablet to the flame, CALIGULA follows the receding figure with his gaze.*

CURTAIN

ACT IV

The stage is in semi-darkness. CHEREA and SCIPIO enter. CHEREA crosses R., then comes back L. to SCIPIO.

SCIPIO

[*Sulkily.*] What do you want of me?

CHEREA

There's no time to lose. And we must know our minds, we must be resolute.

SCIPIO

Who says I'm not resolute?

CHEREA

You didn't attend our meeting yesterday.

SCIPIO

[*Looking away.*] That's so, Cherea.

CHEREA

Scipio, I am older than you, and I'm not in the habit of asking others' help. But, I won't deny it, I need you now. This murder needs honourable men to sponsor it. Amongst all these wounded vanities and sordid fears, our motives only, yours and mine, are disinterested. Of course I know that, if you leave us, we can count on your silence. But that is not the point. What I want is—for you to stay with us.

SCIPIO

I understand. But I can't, oh no, I *cannot* do as you wish.

CHEREA

So you are with him?

SCIPIO

No. But I cannot be against him. [*Pauses; then in a muffled voice.*] Even if I killed him, my heart would still be with him.

CHEREA

And yet—he killed your father!

SCIPIO

Yes—and that's how it all began. But that, too, is how it ends.

CHEREA

He denies what you believe in. He tramples on all that you hold sacred.

SCIPIO

I know, Cherea. And yet something inside me is akin to him. The same fire burns in both our hearts.

CHEREA

There are times when a man must make his choice. Personally I have silenced in my heart all that might be akin to him.

SCIPIO

But—I—I cannot make a choice. I have my own sorrow, but I suffer with him, too; I share his pain. I understand all—that is my trouble.

CHEREA

So that's it. You have chosen to take his side.

SCIPIO

[*Passionately.*] No, Cherea. I beg you, don't think that. I can never, never again take anybody's side.

CHEREA

[*Affectionately; approaching* SCIPIO.] Do you know, I hate him even more for having made of you—what he has made.

SCIPIO

Yes, he has taught me to expect everything of life.

CHEREA

No, he has taught you despair. And to have instilled despair into a young heart is fouler than the foulest of the crimes he has committed up to now. I assure you, *that* alone would justify me in killing him out of hand.

He goes towards the door. HELICON enters.

HELICON

I've been hunting for you high and low, Cherea. Caligula's giving a little party here, for his personal friends only. Naturally he expects you to attend it. [*To SCIPIO.*] You, my boy, aren't wanted. Off you go!

SCIPIO

[*Looking back at CHEREA, as he goes out.*] Cherea.

CHEREA

[*Gently.*] Yes, Scipio?

SCIPIO

Try to understand.

CHEREA

[*In the same gentle tone.*] No, Scipio.

SCIPIO and HELICON go out. *A clash of arms in the wings. Two soldiers enter R., escorting the OLD PATRICIAN and the FIRST PATRICIAN, who show signs of alarm.*

FIRST PATRICIAN

[*To one of the soldiers, in a tone which he vainly tries to steady.*] But . . . but what *can* he want with us at this hour of the night?

SOLDIER

Sit there. [*Points to the chairs on the right.*]

FIRST PATRICIAN

If it's only to have us killed—like so many others—why all these preliminaries?

SOLDIER

Sit down, you old mule.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Better do as he says. It's clear he doesn't know anything.

SOLDIER

Yes, darling, quite clear. [*Goes out.*]

FIRST PATRICIAN

We should have acted sooner; I always said so. Now we're for the torture-chamber.

The SOLDIER comes back with CHEREA, then goes out.

CHEREA

[*Seating himself. He shows no sign of apprehension.*] Any idea what's happening?

FIRST PATRICIAN AND THE OLD PATRICIAN

[*Speaking together.*] He's found out about the conspiracy.

CHEREA

Yes? And then?

THE OLD PATRICIAN

[*Shuddering.*] The torture-chamber for us all.

CHEREA

[*Still unperturbed.*] I remember that Caligula once gave 81,000 sesterces to a slave who, though he was tortured nearly to death, wouldn't confess to a theft he had committed.

FIRST PATRICIAN

A lot of consolation that is—for us!

CHEREA

Anyhow it shows that he appreciates courage. What's more, when he was asked, "Why 81,000 sesterces?" he answered, "And why 80,000 or 79,000?" [*To the OLD PATRICIAN.*] Would you very much mind not chattering with your teeth? It's a noise I particularly dislike.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

I'm sorry, but——

ACT IV]

CALIGULA

FIRST PATRICIAN

Enough trifling! Our lives are at stake.

CHEREA

[*Coolly.*] Do you know Caligula's favourite remark?

THE OLD PATRICIAN

[*On the verge of tears.*] Yes. He says to the executioner, "Kill him slowly, so that he feels what dying's like!"

CHEREA

No, there's a better one. After an execution he yawns, and says quite seriously: "What I admire most is my imperturbability."

FIRST PATRICIAN

Do you hear . . . ?

A clanking of weapons is heard off-stage.

CHEREA

That remark betrays a weakness in his make-up.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Would you be kind enough to stop philosophizing? It's something I particularly dislike.

A SLAVE enters and deposits a sheaf of knives on a seat.

CHEREA

[*Who has not noticed him.*] Philosophizing? I should hardly call it that. Still, there's no denying it's remarkable, the effect this man has on all with whom he comes in contact. He forces one to think. There's nothing like insecurity for stimulating the brain. That, of course, is why he's so much hated.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

[*Pointing a trembling finger.*] Look!

CHEREA

[*Noticing the knives, in a slightly altered tone.*] Perhaps you were right.

CALIGULA

[Act IV

FIRST PATRICIAN

Yes, waiting was a mistake. We should have acted at once.

CHEREA

I agree. Wisdom's come too late.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

But it's . . . it's crazy. I don't want to die.

He rises and begins to edge away. Two SOLDIERS appear and, after slapping his face, force him back on to his seat. The FIRST PATRICIAN squirms in his chair. CHEREA utters some inaudible words. Suddenly a queer music begins behind the curtain at the back of the stage; a thrumming and tinkling of zithers and cymbals. The PATRICIANS gaze at each other in silence. Outlined on the illuminated curtain, in shadow-play, CALIGULA appears, makes some grotesque dance movements, and retreats from view. He is wearing ballet-dancer's skirts and his head is garlanded with flowers. A moment later a SOLDIER announces gravely, "Gentlemen, the performance is over." Meanwhile CAESONIA has entered soundlessly behind the watching PATRICIANS. She speaks in an ordinary voice, but none the less they give a start on hearing it.

CAESONIA

Caligula has instructed me to tell you that, whereas in the past he always summoned you for affairs of state, to-day he invited you to share with him an artistic emotion. [*A short pause. Then she continues in the same tone.*] He added, I may say, that anyone who has not shared in it will be beheaded. [*They keep silent.*] I apologize for insisting, but I must ask you if you found that dance beautiful.

FIRST PATRICIAN

[*After a brief hesitation.*] Yes, Caesonia. It was beautiful.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

[*Effusively.*] Lovely! Lovely!

ACT IV]

CALIGULA

CAESONIA

And you, Cherea?

CHEREA

[*Icily.*] It was . . . very high art.

CAESONIA

Good. Now I can describe your artistic emotions to Caligula.

CAESONIA *goes out.*

CHEREA

And now we must act quickly. You two stay here. Before the night is out there'll be a hundred of us.

He goes out.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

No, no. *You* stay. Let me go, instead. [*Sniffs the air.*] It smells of death here.

62

FIRST PATRICIAN

And of lies. [*Sadly.*] I said that dance was beautiful!

THE OLD PATRICIAN

[*Conciliatingly.*] And so it was, in a way. Most original. *Some PATRICIANS and KNIGHTS enter hurriedly.*

SECOND PATRICIAN

What's on foot? Do you know anything? The Emperor's summoned us here.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

[*Absentmindedly.*] For the dance, maybe.

SECOND PATRICIAN

What dance?

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Well, I mean . . . er . . . the artistic emotion.

THIRD PATRICIAN

I've been told Caligula's very ill.

CALIGULA

[Act IV

FIRST PATRICIAN

He's a sick man, yes . . .

THIRD PATRICIAN

What's he suffering from? [*In a joyful tone.*] By God, is he going to die?

FIRST PATRICIAN

I doubt it. His disease is fatal—to others only.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

That's one way of putting it.

SECOND PATRICIAN

Quite so. But hasn't he some other disease less serious, and more to our advantage?

FIRST PATRICIAN

No. That malady of his excludes all others.

He goes out. CAESONIA enters. A short silence.

CAESONIA

[*In a casual tone.*] If you want to know, Caligula has stomach trouble. Just now he vomited blood.

The PATRICIANS crowd round her.

SECOND PATRICIAN

O mighty gods, I vow, if he recovers, to pay the Treasury two hundred thousand sesterces as a token of my joy.

THIRD PATRICIAN

[*With exaggerated eagerness.*] O Jupiter, take my life in place of his!

CALIGULA has entered, and is listening.

CALIGULA

[*Going up to the SECOND PATRICIAN.*] I accept your offer, Lucius. And I thank you. My Treasurer will call on you to-morrow. [*Goes to the THIRD PATRICIAN and embraces*

ACT IV]

CALIGULA

him.] You can't imagine how touched I am. [*A short silence. Then, tenderly.*] So you love me, Cassius, as much as that?

THIRD PATRICIAN

[*Emotionally.*] Oh Caesar, there's nothing, nothing I wouldn't sacrifice for your sake.

CALIGULA

[*Embracing him again.*] Ah Cassius, this is really too much; I don't deserve all this love. [CASSIUS *makes a protesting gesture.*] No, no, really I don't! I'm not worthy of it. [*He beckons to two soldiers.*] Take him away. [*Gently, to CASSIUS.*] Go, dear friend, and remember that Caligula has lost his heart to you.

THIRD PATRICIAN

[*Vaguely uneasy.*] But—where are they taking me?

CALIGULA

Why, to your death, of course. Your generous offer was accepted, and I feel better already. Even that nasty taste of blood in my mouth has gone. You've cured me, Cassius. It's been miraculous, and how proud you must feel of having worked the miracle by laying your life down for your friend—especially when that friend's none other than Caligula! So now you see me quite myself again, and ready for a festive night.

THIRD PATRICIAN

[*Shrieking, as he is dragged away.*] No! No! I don't want to die. You can't be serious!

CALIGULA

[*In a thoughtful voice, between the shrieks.*] Soon the sea-roads will be golden with mimosas. The women will wear their lightest dresses. And the sky! Ah Cassius, what a blaze of clean, swift sunshine! The smiles of life. [CASSIUS

is near the door. CALIGULA gives him a gentle push. Suddenly his tone grows serious.] Life, my friend, is something to be cherished. Had you cherished it enough, you wouldn't have gambled it away so rashly. [CASSIUS *is led off. CALIGULA returns to the table.*] The loser must pay. There's no alternative. [A short silence.] Come, Caesonia. [He turns to the others.] By the bye, an idea has just waylaid me, and it's such an apt one that I want to share it with you. Until now my reign has been too happy. There's been no world-wide plague, no religious persecution, not even a rebellion—nothing in fact to make us memorable. And that, I'd have you know, is why I try to remedy the stinginess of Fate. I mean—I don't know if you've followed me—that, well [he gives a little laugh], it's I who replace the epidemics that we've missed. [In a different tone.] That's enough. I see Cherea's coming. Your turn, Caesonia.

CALIGULA goes out. CHEREA and the FIRST PATRICIAN enter. CAESONIA hurries towards CHEREA.

CAESONIA

Caligula is dead.

She turns her head, as if to hide her tears; her eyes are fixed on the others, who keep silence. Everyone looks horrified, but for different reasons.

FIRST PATRICIAN

You . . . you're *sure* this dreadful thing has happened? It seems incredible. Only a short while ago he was dancing.

CAESONIA

Quite so—and the effort was too much for him. [CHEREA moves hastily from one man to the other. No one speaks.] You've nothing to say, Cherea?

CHEREA

[In a low voice.] It's a great misfortune for us all, Caesonia. CALIGULA bursts in violently and goes up to CHEREA.

ACT IV]

CALIGULA

CALIGULA

Well played, Cherea. [*He spins round and stares at the others. Petulantly.*] Too bad! It didn't come off. [*To CAESONIA.*] Don't forget what I told you.

CALIGULA goes out. CAESONIA stares after him without speaking.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

[*Hoping against hope.*] Is he ill, Caesonia?

CAESONIA

[*With a hostile look.*] No, my pet. But what you don't know is that the man never has more than two hours' sleep and spends the best part of the night roaming about the corridors in his Palace. Another thing you don't know—and you've never given a thought to—is what may pass in this man's mind in those deadly hours between midnight and sunrise. Is he ill? No, not ill—unless you invent a name and medicine for the black ulcers that fester in his soul.

CHEREA

[*Seemingly affected by her words.*] You're right, Caesonia. We all know that Caius . . .

CAESONIA

[*Breaking in, emotionally.*] Yes, you know it—in your fashion. But, like all those who have none, you can't abide anyone who has too much soul. Healthy people loathe invalids. Happy people hate the sad. Too much soul! That's what bites you, isn't it? You prefer to label it a disease; that way all the dolts are justified and pleased. [*In a changed tone.*] Tell me, Cherea. Has love ever meant anything to you?

CHEREA

[*Himself again.*] I'm afraid we're too old now, Caesonia, to learn the art of love-making. And anyhow it's highly doubtful if Caligula will give us time to do so.

CAESONIA

[Who has recovered her composure.] True enough. *[She sits down.]* Oh, I was forgetting . . . Caligula asked me to impart some news to you. You know, perhaps, that it's a red-letter day to-day, consecrated to art.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

According to the calendar?

CAESONIA

No, according to Caligula. He's convoked some poets. He will ask them to improvise a poem on a set theme. And he particularly wants those of you who are poets to take part in the competition. He specially mentioned young Scipio and Metellus.

METELLUS

But we're not ready.

CAESONIA

[In a level tone, as if she has not heard him.] Needless to say there are prizes. There will be penalties, too. *[Looks of consternation.]* Between ourselves, the penalties won't be so very terrible.

CALIGULA enters, looking gloomier than ever.

CALIGULA

All ready?

CAESONIA

Yes. *[To a SOLDIER.]* Bring in the poets.

Enter, two by two, a dozen POETS, keeping step; they line up on the right of the stage.

CALIGULA

And the others?

CAESONIA

Metellus! Scipio!

They cross the stage and take their stand beside the POETS. CALIGULA seats himself, back stage on the left, with CAESONIA and the PATRICIANS. A short silence.

ACT IV]

CALIGULA

CALIGULA

Subject: Death. Time-limit: one minute.
The poets scribble feverishly on their tablets.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Who will compose the jury?

CALIGULA

I. Isn't that enough?

THE OLD PATRICIAN

Oh yes, indeed. Quite enough.

CHEREA

Won't you take part in the competition, Caius?

CALIGULA

Unnecessary. I made my poem on that theme long ago.

THE OLD PATRICIAN

[*Eagerly.*] Where can one get a copy of it?

CALIGULA

No need to get a copy. I recite it every day, after my fashion. [CAESONIA *eyes him nervously.* CALIGULA *rounds on her almost savagely.*] Is there anything in my appearance that displeases you?

CAESONIA

[*Gently.*] I'm sorry . . .

CALIGULA

No meekness, please. For heaven's sake, no meekness. You're exasperating enough as it is, but if you start being humble . . . [CAESONIA *slowly moves away.* CALIGULA *turns to CHEREA.*] I continue. It's the only poem I have made. And it's proof that I'm the only true artist Rome has known—the only one, believe me—to match his inspiration with his deeds.

CHEREA

That's only a matter of having the power.

CALIGULA

Quite true. Other artists create to compensate for their lack of power. I don't need to make a work of art; I *live* it. [*Roughly.*] Well, poets, are you ready?

METELLUS

I think so.

THE OTHERS

Yes.

CALIGULA

Good. Now listen carefully. You are to fall out of line and come forward one by one. I'll whistle. Number One will start reading his poem. When I whistle, he must stop, and the next begin. And so on. The winner, naturally, will be the one whose poem hasn't been cut short by the whistle. Get ready. [*Turning to CHEREA, he whispers.*] You see, organization's needed for everything, even for art.
Blows his whistle.

FIRST POET

Death, when beyond thy darkling shore . . .
A blast of the whistle. The POET steps briskly to the left.
THE OTHERS *will follow the same procedure. These movements should be made with mechanical precision.*

SECOND POET

In their dim cave, the Fatal Sisters Three . . .
Whistle.

THIRD POET

Come to me death, beloved . . .
A shrill blast of the whistle. The FOURTH POET steps forward and strikes a dramatic posture. The whistle goes before he has opened his mouth.

FIFTH POET

When I was in my happy infancy . . .

ACT IV]

CALIGULA

CALIGULA

[*Yelling.*] Stop that! What earthly connection has a block-head's happy infancy with the theme I set? The connection! Tell me the connection!

FIFTH POET

But, Caius, I've only just begun, and . . . [*Shrill blast.*]

SIXTH POET

[*In a high-pitched voice.*] Ruthless, he goes his hidden ways . . .

Whistle. SCIPIO comes forward without a tablet.

CALIGULA

You haven't a tablet?

SCIPIO

I do not need one.

CALIGULA

Well, let's hear you. [*He chews at his whistle.*]

SCIPIO

[*Standing very near CALIGULA, he recites listlessly, without looking at him.*]

Pursuit of happiness that purifies the heart,
Skies rippling with light,
O wild, sweet, festal joys, frenzy without hope!

CALIGULA

[*Gently.*] Stop, please. The others needn't compete. [*To SCIPIO.*] You're very young to understand so well the lessons we can learn from Death.

SCIPIO

[*Gazing straight at CALIGULA.*] I was very young to lose my father.

CALIGULA

[*Turning hastily.*] Fall in, the rest of you. No, really a sham poet is too dreadful an infiction. Until now I'd thought of

enrolling you as my allies; I sometimes pictured a gallant band of poets defending me in the last ditch. Another illusion gone! I shall have to relegate you to my enemies. So now the poets are against me—and that looks much like the end of all. March out in good order. As you go past you are to lick your tablets so as to efface the atrocities you scrawled on them. Attention! Forward! [*He blows his whistle in short rhythmic jerks. Keeping step, the poets file out by the right, tonguing their immortal tablets. CALIGULA adds in a lower tone*] Now leave me, everyone.

In the doorway, as they are going out, CHEREA touches the FIRST PATRICIAN'S shoulder, and speaks in his ear.

CHEREA

Now's our opportunity.

SCIPIO, *who has overheard, halts on the threshold and walks back to CALIGULA.*

CALIGULA

[*Acidly.*] Can't you leave me in peace—as your father's doing?

SCIPIO

No, Caius, all that serves no purpose now. For now I know, I *know* that you have made your choice.

CALIGULA

Won't you leave me in peace!

SCIPIO

Yes, you shall have your wish; I am going to leave you, for I think I've come to understand you. There's no way out left to us, neither to you nor to me—who am like you in so many ways. I shall go away, far away, and try to discover the meaning of it all. [*He gazes at CALIGULA for some moments. Then, with a rush of emotion*] Good-bye, dear Caius. When all is ended, remember that I loved you. *He turns away. CALIGULA makes a vague gesture. Then, almost*

ACT IV]

CALIGULA

savagely, he pulls himself together and takes some steps towards CAESONIA.

SCIPIO

You have chosen, Caligula. [*Goes out.*]

CAESONIA

What did he say?

CALIGULA

Nothing you'd understand . . . But come beside me.
A short silence.

CAESONIA

[*Nestling against him.*] What are you thinking about?

CALIGULA

I was wondering why I'd kept you with me so long.

CAESONIA

Why, because you're fond of me.

CALIGULA

No. But I think I'd understand—if I had you killed.

CAESONIA

Yes, that would be a solution. Do so, then . . . But why, oh why can't you relax, if only for a moment, and live freely, without constraint?

CALIGULA

I have been doing that for several years; in fact I've made a practice of it.

CAESONIA

I don't mean that sort of freedom. I mean—— Oh, don't you realize what it can be to live and love quite simply, naturally, in . . . in purity of heart?

CALIGULA

This purity of heart you talk of—every man acquires it, in his own way. Mine has been to follow the essential to

the end. . . . Still all that needn't prevent me from putting you to death. [*Laughs.*] It would round off my career so well, the perfect climax. [*He rises and swings the mirror round towards himself. Then he walks in a circle, letting his arms hang limp, almost without gestures; there is something feral in his gait, as he continues speaking.*] How strange! When I don't kill, I feel alone. The living don't suffice to people my world and dispel my boredom. I have an impression of an enormous void when you and the others are here, and my eyes see nothing but empty air. No, I'm at ease only in the company of my dead. [*He takes his stand facing the audience, leaning a little forward. He has forgotten CAESONIA's presence.*] Only the dead are real. They are of my kind. I see them waiting for me, straining towards me. And I have long talks with this man or that, who screamed to me for mercy and whose tongue I had cut out.

CAESONIA

Come. Lie down beside me. Put your head on my knees. [CALIGULA *does so.*] That's better, isn't it? Now rest. How quiet it is here!

CALIGULA

Quiet? You exaggerate, my dear. Listen! [*Distant metallic tinklings, as of swords or armour.*] Do you hear those thousands of small sounds all around us, hatred stalking its prey? [*Murmuring voices, footsteps.*]

CAESONIA

Nobody would dare . . .

CALIGULA

Yes, stupidity.

CAESONIA

Stupidity doesn't kill. It makes men slow to act.

CALIGULA

It can be murderous, Caesonia. A fool stops at nothing when he thinks his dignity offended. No, it's not the men

ACT IV]

CALIGULA

whose sons or fathers I have killed who'll murder me. *They*, anyhow, have understood. They're with me, they have the same taste in their mouths. But the others—those I made a laughing-stock of—I've no defence against their wounded vanity.

CAESONIA

[*Passionately.*] We will defend you. There are many of us left who love you.

CALIGULA

Fewer every day. It's not surprising. I've done all that was needed to that end. And then—let's be fair—it's not only stupidity that's against me. There's the courage and the simple faith of men who ask to be happy.

CAESONIA

[*In the same tone.*] No, *they* will not kill you. Or, if they tried, fire would come down from heaven and blast them, before they laid a hand on you.

CALIGULA

From heaven! There is no heaven, my poor dear woman! [*He sits down.*] But why this sudden access of devotion? It wasn't catered for in our agreement, if I remember rightly.

CAESONIA

[*Who has risen from the couch and is pacing the room.*] Don't you understand? Hasn't it been enough to see you killing others, without my also knowing you'll be killed as well? Isn't it enough to feel you hard and cruel, seething with bitterness, when I hold you in my arms; to breathe a reek of murder when you lie on me? Day after day I see all that's human in you dying out, little by little [*She turns towards him.*] Oh, I know. I know I'm getting old, my beauty's on the wane. But it's you only I'm concerned for now; so much so that I've ceased troubling whether you love me. I only want you to get well, quite well again.

You're still a boy, really; you've a whole life ahead of you. And, tell me, what greater thing can you want than a whole life?

CALIGULA

[*Rising, looks at her fixedly.*] You've been with me a long time now, a very long time.

CAESONIA

Yes . . . But you'll keep me, won't you?

CALIGULA

I don't know. I only know that, if you're with me still, it's because of all those nights we've had together, nights of fierce, joyless pleasure; it's because you alone know me as I am. [*He takes her in his arms, bending her head back a little with his right hand.*] I'm twenty-nine. Not a great age really. But to-day when none the less my life seems so long, so crowded with scraps and shreds of my past selves, so complete in fact, you remain the last witness. And I can't avoid a sort of shameful tenderness for the old woman that you soon will be.

CAESONIA

Tell me that you mean to keep me with you.

CALIGULA

I don't know. All I know—and it's the most terrible thing of all—is that this shameful tenderness is the one sincere emotion that my life has given up to now. [*CAESONIA frees herself from his arms. CALIGULA follows her. She presses her back to his chest and he puts his arms round her.*] Wouldn't it be better that the last witness should disappear?

CAESONIA

That has no importance. All I know is: I'm happy. What you've just said has made me very happy. But why can't I share my happiness with you?

CALIGULA

Who says I'm unhappy?

CAESONIA

Happiness is kind. It doesn't thrive on bloodshed.

CALIGULA

Then there must be two kinds of happiness, and I've chosen the murderous kind. For I *am* happy. There was a time when I thought I'd reached the extremity of pain. But, no, one can go farther yet. Beyond the frontier of pain lies a splendid, sterile happiness. Look at me. [*She turns towards him.*] It makes me laugh, Caesonia, when I think how for years and years all Rome carefully avoided uttering Drusilla's name. Well, all Rome was mistaken. Love isn't enough for me; I realized it then. And I realize it again to-day, when I look at you. To love someone means that one's willing to grow old beside that person. That sort of love is right outside my range. Drusilla old would have been far worse than Drusilla dead. Most people imagine that a man suffers because out of the blue Death snatches away the woman he loves. But his real suffering is less futile; it comes from the discovery that grief, too, cannot last. Even grief is vanity.

You see, I had no excuses, not the shadow of a real love, neither bitterness nor profound regret. Nothing to plead in my defence! But to-day—you see me still freer than I have been for years; freed as I am from memories and illusion. [*He laughs bitterly.*] I know now that nothing, *nothing* lasts. Think what that knowledge means! There have been just two or three of us in history who really achieved this freedom, this crazy happiness. Well, Caesonia, you have seen out a most unusual drama. It's time the curtain fell, for you.

He stands behind her again, linking his forearm round
CAESONIA'S neck.

CAESONIA

[*Terrified.*] No, it's impossible! How can you call it happiness, this terrifying freedom?

CALIGULA

[*Gradually tightening his grip on CAESONIA's throat.*] Happiness it is, Caesonia; I know what I'm saying. But for this freedom I'd have been a contented man. Thanks to it, I have won the godlike enlightenment of the solitary. [*His exaltation grows as little by little he strangles CAESONIA, who puts up no resistance, but holds her hands half-opened, like a suppliant's, before her. Bending his head, he goes on speaking, into her ear.*] I live, I kill, I exercise the rapturous power of a destroyer, compared with which the power of a creator is merest child's-play. And this, *this* is happiness; this and nothing else—this intolerable release, devastating scorn, blood, hatred all around me; the glorious isolation of a man who all his life long nurses and gloats over the joy ineffable of the unpunished murderer; the ruthless logic that crushes out human lives [*he laughs*], that's crushing yours out, Caesonia, so as to perfect at last the utter loneliness that is my heart's desire.

CAESONIA

[*Struggling feebly.*] Oh, Caius . . .

CALIGULA

[*More and more excitedly.*] No. No sentiment. I must have done with it, for the time is short. My time is very short, dear Caesonia. [*CAESONIA is gasping, dying. CALIGULA drags her to the bed and lets her fall on it. He stares wildly at her; his voice grows harsh and grating.*] You, too, were guilty. But killing is not the solution. [*He spins round and gazes crazily at the mirror.*] Caligula! You, too; you, too, are guilty. Then what of it—a little more, a little less? Yet who can condemn me in this world where there is no

CALIGULA

He brings his eyes close together, looking at his hand. [He brings his eyes close together, looking at his hand.] You see, my dear friend, I have been misled you. I shan't have the power to do that. But how bitter it is to know that I have to go through to the consummation! I have a sword of weapons. Innocence arming for the day—and my voice will triumph. Why am I not in that place among them? And I'm afraid. That's cowardly as they say. But, no matter. Fear, too, has an end. Soon I shall attain that emptiness beyond all understanding, in which the heart has rest. [He steps back a few paces, then returns to the mirror. He seems calmer. When he speaks again his voice is softer, less shrill.]

Yet really, it's quite simple. If I'd had the moon, if love were enough, all might have been different. But where could I quench this thirst? What human heart, what god, would have for me the depth of a great lake? [Kneeling, weeping.] There's nothing in this world, or in the other, made to my stature. And yet I know, and you too know [still weeping, he stretches out his arms towards the mirror] that all I need is for the impossible to be. The impossible! I've searched for it at the confines of the world, in the secret places of my heart. I've stretched out my hands; [his voice rises to a scream] see, I stretch out my hands, but it's always you I find, you only. confronting me, and I've come to hate you. I have chosen a wrong path, a path that leads to nothing. My freedom isn't the right one... Nothing, nothing yet. Oh, how oppressive is this darkness! Helicon has not come; we shall be for ever guilty. The air to-night is heavy as the sum of human sorrows. [A clash of arms and whisperings are heard in the wings. CALIGULA rises, picks up a stool and returns to the mirror, breathing heavily. He contemplates himself, makes a slight leap forward and, watching the symmetrical movement of his reflected self, hurls the stool at it, screaming] To history, Caligula! Go

down to history! [*The mirror breaks and at the same moment armed conspirators rush in. CALIGULA swings round to face them, with a mad laugh. SCIPIO and CHEREA, who are in front, fling themselves at him and stab his face with their daggers. CALIGULA'S laughter turns to gasps. All strike him, hurriedly, confusedly. In a last gasp, laughing and choking, CALIGULA shrieks*] I'm still alive!

CURTAIN

CROSS PURPOSE

A Play in Three Acts

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

THE OLD MANSERVANT, no determinate age

MARTHA, THE SISTER, aged thirty

THE MOTHER, aged sixty

JAN, THE SON, aged thirty-eight

MARIA, HIS WIFE, aged thirty

ACT I

Noon. The inn-parlour; a clean, brightly lit room. Everything is very spick and span.

THE MOTHER

He'll come back.

MARTHA

Did he tell you so?

THE MOTHER

Yes.

MARTHA

Alone?

THE MOTHER

That I can't say.

MARTHA

He doesn't look like a poor man.

THE MOTHER

No, and he never asked what our charges were.

MARTHA

A good sign, that. But usually rich men don't travel alone. Really it's *that* makes things so difficult. You may have to wait ages when you're looking out for a man who is not only rich but quite alone.

THE MOTHER

Yes, we don't get so many opportunities.

MARTHA

It means, of course, that we've had many slack times these last few years. This place is often empty. Poor folks who

ACT I]

CROSS PURPOSE *ll, l / / /*

stop here never stay long, and it's mighty seldom rich ones come.

THE MOTHER

Don't grumble about that, Martha. Rich people give a lot of extra work.

MARTHA

[*Looking hard at her.*] But they pay well. [*A short silence.*] Tell me, mother; what's come over you? For some time I've noticed that you weren't quite . . . quite your usual self.

THE MOTHER

I'm tired, my dear, that's all. What I need is a long rest.

MARTHA

Listen, mother. I can take over the household work you're doing now. Then you'll have your days free.

THE MOTHER

That wasn't quite the sort of rest I meant. Oh, I suppose it's just an old woman's fancy. All I'm longing for is peace—to be able to relax a little. [*She gives a little laugh.*] I know it sounds silly, Martha, but some evenings I feel almost like taking to religion.

MARTHA

You're not so very old, mother; you haven't come to that yet. And, anyhow, I should say *you* could do better.

THE MOTHER

Of course I was only joking, my dear. All the same . . . at the end of one's life, it's not a bad idea to take things easy. One can't be always on the stretch, as you are, Martha. And it isn't natural for a woman of your age, either. I know plenty of girls who were born the same year as you, and they think only of pleasure and excitements.

MARTHA

Their pleasures and excitements are nothing compared to ours, don't you agree, mother?

CROSS PURPOSE

[Act I

THE MOTHER

I'd rather you didn't speak of that.

MARTHA

[*Thoughtfully.*] Really one would think that nowadays some words burn your tongue.

THE MOTHER

What can it matter to you—provided I don't shrink from acts? But that has no great importance. What I really meant was that I'd like to see you smile now and again.

MARTHA

I do smile sometimes, I assure you.

THE MOTHER

Really? I've never seen you.

MARTHA

That's because I smile when I'm by myself, in my bedroom.

THE MOTHER

[*Looking closely at her.*] What a hard face you have, Martha!

MARTHA

[*Coming closer; calmly.*] Ah, so you don't approve of my face?

THE MOTHER

[*After a short silence, still looking at her.*] I wonder . . . Yes, I think I do.

MARTHA

[*Emotionally.*] Oh mother, can't you understand? Once we have enough money in hand, and I can escape from this shut-in valley; once we can say good-bye to this inn and this dreary town where it's always raining; once we've forgotten this land of shadows—ah then, when my dream has come true, and we're living beside the sea, *then* you

ACT I]

CROSS PURPOSE

will see me smile. Unhappily one needs a great deal of money to be able to live in freedom by the sea. That is why we mustn't be afraid of words; that is why we must take trouble over this man who's come to stay here. If he is rich enough, perhaps my freedom will begin with him.

THE MOTHER

If he's rich enough, and if he's by himself.

MARTHA

That's so. He has to be by himself as well. Did he talk much to you, mother?

THE MOTHER

No, he said very little.

MARTHA

When he asked for his room, did you notice how he looked?

THE MOTHER

No. My sight's none too good, as you know, and I didn't really look at his face. I've learnt from experience that it's better not to look at them too closely. It's easier to kill what one doesn't know. [*A short silence.*] There! That should please you. You can't say now that I'm afraid of words.

MARTHA

Yes, and I prefer it so. I've no use for hints and evasions. Crime is crime, and one should know what one is about. And, from what you've just said, it looks as if you had it in mind when you were talking to that traveller.

THE MOTHER

No, I wouldn't say I had it in mind—it was more from force of habit.

MARTHA

Habit? But you said yourself that these opportunities seldom come our way.

CROSS PURPOSE

[Act I

THE MOTHER

Certainly. But habit begins with the second crime. With the first nothing starts, but something ends. Then, too, while we have had few opportunities, they have been spread out over many years, and memory helps to build up habits. Yes, it was force of habit that made me keep my eyes off that man when I was talking to him and, all the same, convinced me he had the look of a victim.

MARTHA

Mother, we must kill him.

THE MOTHER

[*In a low tone.*] Eh, yes, I suppose we'll have to.

MARTHA

You said that in a curious way.

THE MOTHER

I'm tired, that's a fact. Anyhow, I'd like this one to be the last. It's terribly tiring to kill. And, though really I care little where I die—beside the sea or here, far inland—I do hope we will get away together, the moment it's over.

MARTHA

Indeed we shall—and what a glorious moment that will be! So, cheer up, mother, there won't be much to do. You know quite well there's no question of killing. He'll drink his tea, he'll go to sleep, and he'll be still alive when we carry him to the river. Some day, long after, he will be found jammed against the weir, along with others who didn't have his luck and threw themselves into the water with their eyes open. Do you remember last year when we were watching them repair the sluices, how you said that our ones suffered least, and life was crueller than we? So don't lose heart, you'll be having your rest quite soon and I'll be seeing what I've never seen.

THE MOTHER

Yes, Martha, I won't lose heart. And it was quite true, what you said about "our ones." I'm always glad to think they never suffered. Really, it's hardly a crime, only a sort of intervention, a flick of the finger given to unknown lives. And it's also quite true that, by the look of it, life is crueller than we. Perhaps that is why I can't manage to feel guilty. I can only just manage to feel tired.

The old MANSERVANT comes in. He seats himself behind the bar-counter and remains there, neither moving nor speaking, until JAN's entrance.

MARTHA

Which room shall we put him in?

THE MOTHER

Any room, provided it's on the first floor.

MARTHA

Yes, we had a lot of needless trouble last time, with the two flights of stairs. [*For the first time she sits down.*] Tell me, mother, is it true that down on the coast the sand's so hot it scorches one's feet?

THE MOTHER

As you know, Martha, I've never been there. But I've been told the sun burns everything up.

MARTHA

I read in a book that it even burns out people's souls and gives them bodies that shine like gold but are quite hollow, there's nothing left inside.

THE MOTHER

Is that what makes you want to go there so much?

MARTHA

Yes, my soul's a burden to me, I've had enough of it. I'm eager to be in that country, where the sun kills every question. I don't belong here.

CROSS PURPOSE

[Act I

THE MOTHER

Unfortunately we have much to do beforehand. Of course, when it's over, I'll go there with you. But I am not like you; I shall not have the feeling of going to a place where I belong. After a certain age one knows there is no resting-place anywhere. Indeed there's something to be said for this ugly brick house we've made our home and stocked with memories; there are times when one can fall asleep in it. But, naturally it would mean something, too, if I could have sleep and forgetfulness together. [*She rises and walks towards the door.*] Well, Martha, get everything ready. [*Pauses.*] If it's really worth the effort.

MARTHA *watches her go out. Then she, too, leaves by another door. For some moments only the old MANSERVANT is on the stage. JAN enters, stops, glances round the room and sees the old man sitting behind the counter.*

JAN

Nobody about? [*The old man gazes at him, rises, crosses the stage and goes out. MARIA enters. JAN swings round on her.*] So you followed me!

MARIA

Forgive me—I couldn't help it. I may not stay long. Only please let me look at the place where I'm leaving you.

JAN

Somebody may come, and your being here will upset all my plans.

MARIA

Do please let us take the chance of someone's coming and my telling who you are. I know you don't want it, but—
[*He turns away fretfully. A short silence. MARIA is examining the room.*] So this is the place?

JAN

Yes. That's the door I went out by, twenty years ago. My

ACT I]

CROSS PURPOSE

sister was a little girl. She was playing in that corner. My mother didn't come to kiss me. At the time I thought I didn't care.

MARIA

Jan, I can't believe they failed to recognize you just now. A mother's bound to recognize her son; it's the least she can do.

JAN

Perhaps. Still, twenty years' separation makes a difference. Life has been going on since I left. My mother's grown old, her sight is failing. I hardly recognized her myself.

MARIA

[*Impatiently.*] I know. You came in; you said "Good day"; you sat down. This room wasn't like the one you remembered.

JAN

Yes, my memory had played me false. They received me without a word. I was given the glass of beer I asked for. I was looked at, but I wasn't *seen*. Everything was more difficult than I'd expected.

MARIA

You know quite well it needn't have been difficult; you had only to speak. On such occasions one says "It's I," and then it's all plain sailing.

JAN

True. But I'd been imagining—all sorts of things. I'd expected a welcome like the prodigal son's. Actually I was given a glass of beer, against payment. It took the words out of my mouth, and I thought I'd better let things take their course.

MARIA

There was nothing to take its course. It was another of the ideas of yours—and a word would have been enough.

CROSS PURPOSE

[Act I

JAN

It wasn't an idea of mine, Maria; it was the force of things. What's more, I'm not in such a hurry. I have come here to bring them my money and, if I can, some happiness. When I learnt about my father's death I realized I had duties towards these two women and now, as a result, I'm doing what it's right for me to do. But evidently it is not so easy as people think, coming back to one's old home, and it takes time to change a stranger into a son.

MARIA

But why not let them know the truth at once? There are situations in which the normal way of acting is obviously the best. If one wants to be recognized, one starts by telling one's name; that's common sense. Otherwise, by pretending to be what one is not, one simply muddles everything. How could you expect not to be treated as a stranger in a house you entered under false colours? No, dear, there's something . . . something morbid about the way you're going on.

JAN

Oh come, Maria! It's not so serious as that. And, mind you, it suits my plan. I shall take this opportunity of seeing them from the outside. Then I'll have a better notion of what to do to make them happy. Afterwards, I'll find some way of getting them to recognize me. It's just a matter of choosing one's words.

MARIA

No, there's only one way, and it's to do what any ordinary mortal would do—to say, "It's I," and to let one's heart speak for itself.

JAN

The heart isn't so simple as all that.

MARIA

But it uses simple words. Surely there was no difficulty in saying, "I'm your son. This is my wife. I've been living

with her in a country we both love, a land of endless sunshine beside the sea. But something was lacking there, to complete my happiness, and now I feel I need you."

JAN

Don't be unfair, Maria. I don't need them; but I realized they may need me, and a man doesn't live only for himself. *A short silence. MARIA looks away from him.*

MARIA

Perhaps you are right. I'm sorry for what I said. But I have grown terribly suspicious since coming to this country where I've looked in vain for a single happy face. This Europe of yours is so sad. Since we've been here, I haven't once heard you laugh and, personally, I feel my nerves on edge all the time. Oh, why did you make me leave my country? Let's go away, Jan; we shall not find happiness here.

JAN

It's not happiness we've come for. We had happiness already.

MARIA

[Passionately.] Then why not have been satisfied with it?

JAN

Happiness isn't everything; there is duty, too. Mine was to come back to my mother and my own country. *[MARIA makes a protesting gesture and is about to answer. JAN checks her. Footsteps can be heard.]* Someone's coming. Do please go, Maria.

MARIA

No, I can't, I can't! Not yet, anyhow!

JAN

[As the footsteps approach.] Go there. *[He gently pushes her towards the door at the back. The old MANSERVANT crosses the room without seeing MARIA, and goes out by the other door.]* Now, leave at once. You see, luck is on my side.

MARIA

Do, please, let me stay. I promise not to speak a word, only to stay beside you till you're recognized.

JAN

No. You'd give me away.

She turns away, then comes back and looks him in the eyes.

MARIA

Jan, we've been married for five years.

JAN

Yes, almost five years.

MARIA

[*Lowering her eyes.*] And this will be the first night we spend apart. [*He says nothing and she looks up, gazing earnestly at him.*] I've always loved everything about you, even what I didn't understand, and I know that really I wouldn't wish you to be other than you are. I'm not a very troublesome wife, am I? But here I'm scared of the empty bed you are sending me to, and I'm afraid, too, of your forsaking me.

JAN

Surely you can trust my love better than that?

MARIA

I do trust it. But besides your love there are your dreams—or your duties; they're the same thing. They take you away from me so often, and at those moments it's as if you were having a holiday from me. But I can't take a holiday from you, and to-night [*She presses herself to him, weeping*], this night without you—oh, I shall never be able to bear it!

JAN

[*Clasping her tightly.*] But this is childishness, my dear!

MARIA

Of course it's childish. But . . . but we were so happy over there, and it's not my fault if the nights in this country terrify me. I don't want to be alone to-night.

JAN

But do try to understand, my dear; I've a promise to keep, and it's most important.

MARIA

What promise?

JAN

The one I made to myself on the day I understood my mother needed me.

MARIA

You've another promise to keep.

JAN

Yes?

MARIA

The promise you made me on the day you joined your life to mine.

JAN

But surely I can keep both promises. What I'm asking of you is nothing very terrible. Nor is it a mere caprice. Only one evening and one night in which to take my bearings here, get to know better these two women who are dear to me, and to secure their happiness.

MARIA

[*Shaking her head.*] A separation always means a lot to people who love each other—with the right kind of love.

JAN

But, you romantic little creature, you know quite well I love you with the right kind of love.

MARIA

No, Jan. Men do not know how real love should be. Nothing they have can ever satisfy them. They're always dreaming dreams, building up new duties, going to new countries and new homes. Women are different; they know that life is short and one must make haste to love, to share the same bed, embrace the man one loves, and dread every separation. When one loves one has no time for dreams.

JAN

But, really, dear, aren't you exaggerating? It's such a simple thing I'm doing; trying to get in touch again with my mother, to help her and bring her happiness. As for my dreams and duties, you'll have to take them as they are. Without them I'd be a mere shadow of myself; indeed you'd love me less, were I without them.

MARIA

[Turning her back to him abruptly.] Oh, I know you can talk me round, you can always find good reasons for anything you want to do. But I refuse to listen, I stop my ears when you start speaking in that special voice I know so well. It's the voice of your loneliness, not of love.

JAN

[Standing behind her.] Don't let's talk of that now, Maria. All I'm asking is to be left here by myself, so that I can clear up certain things in my mind. Really it's nothing so very terrible, or extraordinary, my sleeping under the same roof as my mother. God will see to the rest and He knows, too, that in acting thus I'm not forgetting you. Only—no one can be happy in exile or estrangement. One can't remain a stranger all one's life. It is quite true that a man needs happiness, but he also needs to find his true place in the world. And I believe that coming back to my country, making the happiness of those I love, will help me to do this. I don't look any farther.

MARIA

Surely you could do it without all these . . . these complications? No, Jan, I'm afraid you are going the wrong way about it.

JAN

It's the right way, because it's the only way of finding out whether or not I did well to have those "dreams."

MARIA

I hope you'll find that you did well. Personally, I have only one dream—of that country where we were happy together; and only one duty—towards you.

JAN

[*Embracing her.*] Let me have my way, dear. I'll find the things to say that will put everything right.

MARIA

[*In an access of emotion.*] Then follow your dream, dear. Nothing matters, if only I keep your love. Usually I can't be unhappy when you hold me in your arms. I bide my time, I wait till you come down from the clouds; and then my hour begins. What makes me so unhappy to-day is that, though I'm quite sure of your love, I'm no less sure you will not let me stay with you. That's why men's love is so cruel, so heart-rending. They can't prevent themselves from leaving what they value most.

JAN

[*Holding her face between his hands, and smiling.*] Quite true, my dear. But come now! Look at me! I'm not in any danger, as you seem to fear. I'm carrying out my plan, and I know all will be well. You're entrusting me for just one night to my mother and my sister; there's nothing so alarming about that, is there?

MARIA

[*Freeing herself.*] Then—good-bye! And may my love shield

you from harm. [*She goes to the door, and holds out her hands.*] See how poor I am; they're empty! You—you're going forward to adventure. I can only wait.
After a momentary hesitation she goes out. JAN sits down. MARTHA enters.

JAN

Good afternoon. I've come about the room.

MARTHA

I know. It's being got ready. But, first, I must enter you in our Visitors' Book.
She goes out and comes back with the register.

JAN

I must say, your servant is a very queer fellow.

MARTHA

This is the first time we've had any complaint about him. He always carries out his duties quite satisfactorily.

JAN

Oh, I wasn't complaining. I only meant that he seemed a bit of a character. Is he dumb?

MARTHA

It's not that.

JAN

Ah! then he does speak.

MARTHA

As little as possible and only when really necessary.

JAN

Anyhow, he doesn't seem to hear what one says.

MARTHA

It's not so much that he doesn't hear; only he hears badly. Now I must ask you for your name and Christian names.

ACT I]

CROSS PURPOSE

JAN

Hasek, Karl.

MARTHA

Only Karl?

JAN

Yes.

MARTHA

Date and place of birth?

JAN

I'm thirty-eight.

MARTHA

Yes, but where were you born?

JAN

[*After a brief hesitation.*] Oh, in . . . in Bohemia.

MARTHA

Profession?

JAN

None.

MARTHA

One has to be very rich, or very poor, to travel, when one does no work.

JAN

[*Smiling.*] I'm not very poor and, for several reasons, I'm glad it's so.

MARTHA

[*In a different tone.*] You're a Czech, I suppose?

JAN

Certainly.

MARTHA

Your usual residence?

JAN

In Bohemia.

MARTHA

Have you come from there?

JAN

No, I've come from the south. [*She looks at him questioningly.*] From across the sea.

MARTHA

Ah, yes. [*A short silence.*] Do you go there often?

JAN

Fairly often.

MARTHA

[*She seems lost in thought for some moments before continuing.*] And where are you going?

JAN

I've not decided. It will depend on a lot of things.

MARTHA

Then do you propose to stay here?

JAN

I don't know. It depends on what I find here.

MARTHA

That doesn't matter. Is no one here expecting you?

JAN

No, I couldn't say anyone's expecting me.

MARTHA

You have your identity papers, I suppose?

JAN

Yes, I can show you them.

MARTHA

Don't trouble. I've only got to write down whether you have an identity card or a passport.

JAN

[*Producing a passport from his pocket.*] I've a passport. Here it is. Will you have a look at it?

She takes it, but her thoughts are obviously elsewhere. She seems to be weighing it in her palm; then she hands it back.

MARTHA

No, keep it. When you're over there, do you live near the sea?

JAN

Yes.

She gets up, seems about to put the book away; then, changing her mind, holds it open in front of her.

MARTHA

[*With sudden harshness.*] Ah, I was forgetting. Have you a family?

JAN

Well, I had one once. But I left them many years ago.

MARTHA

No, I meant, are you married?

JAN

Why do you ask that? I've never had the question put to me in any other hotel.

MARTHA

It's one of the questions on the list given us by the police.

JAN

You surprise me . . . Yes, I'm married. Didn't you notice my wedding-ring?

MARTHA

No, I didn't. It's none of my business to look at your hands; I'm here to fill in your registration form. Your wife's address, please.

CROSS PURPOSE

[Act I

JAN

Well, she . . . as a matter of fact, she's stayed behind, in her country.

MARTHA

Ah! Very good. [*Closes the book.*] Shall I bring you a drink now, while your room's being got ready?

JAN

No, thanks. But, if you don't mind, I'll stay here. I hope I shan't be in your way.

MARTHA

Why should you be in my way? 'This is a public room, for the use of our customers.

JAN

Quite so. But someone by himself can be more of a nuisance than a crowd of people.

MARTHA

Why? I presume you don't intend to waste my time with idle chatter. I've no use for folks who come here and try to play the fool—and you should have guessed that. The people hereabouts have learnt it, anyhow, and you'll very soon see for yourself that this is a quiet inn, and you'll have all the calm you want. Hardly anybody comes here.

JAN

That can't be very good for business.

MARTHA

We may lose some takings, but we make up for them in peace, and peace is something for which you can't pay too high a price. And don't forget that one good customer is better than a roaring trade; so that's what we are out for—the right kind of visitor.

JAN

But . . . [*He hesitates.*] Isn't your life here a bit dull at times? Don't you and your mother find it very lonely?

MARTHA

[*Rounding on him angrily.*] I decline to answer such questions. You had no business to ask them, and you should have known it. I can see I'll have to warn you how things stand. As a guest at this inn you have the rights and privileges of a guest, but nothing more. Still, don't be afraid, you will have every attention you're entitled to. You will be very well looked after and I shall be greatly surprised if ever you complain of your reception here. But I fail to see why we should go out of our way to give you special reasons for satisfaction. That's why your questions are out of place. It has nothing to do with you whether or not we feel lonely; just as you need not trouble yourself whether you cause us inconvenience or ask too much of us. By all means stand upon your rights as a guest. But do not go beyond them.

JAN

I beg your pardon. Nothing was further from my intention than to offend you; I only wanted to show my good will. I had a feeling that perhaps we weren't quite so remote from each other as you seem to think; no more than that.

MARTHA

I can see I must repeat what I was saying. There can be no question of offending me or not offending me. Since you seem determined to adopt an attitude which you have no right to adopt, I prefer to make things clear. I can assure you I'm not in the least vexed. Only it is in our interest, yours and mine, that we should keep our distance. If you persist in talking in a manner unbecoming a guest, there's no alternative; we must refuse to have you here. But if you will understand, as I cannot doubt you will, that two women who let you a room in their hotel are under no obligation to treat you as a friend into the bargain, all will go smoothly.

JAN

I quite agree; and it was inexcusable, my giving you an impression that I failed to understand this.

MARTHA

Oh, there's no great harm done. You are not the first who's tried to take that line. But I always made it pretty clear how we felt about such matters, and that settled it.

JAN

Yes, you certainly have made it clear, and I suppose I'd better say no more—for the present.

MARTHA

Not at all. There's nothing to prevent your talking as a guest should talk.

JAN

And how should a guest talk?

MARTHA

Most of our guests talk about all sorts of things: politics, their travels, and so forth. Never about my mother or myself—and that is as it should be. Some of them even talk about their private lives or their jobs. And that, too, is within their rights. After all, one of the services for which we're paid is listening to our customers. But it goes without saying that the charges made for board and lodging don't oblige hotel keepers to answer personal questions. My mother may do so sometimes, out of indifference; but I make a principle of refusing. Once you've grasped this, we shall not only be on excellent terms, but you'll discover you have many things to tell us, and that sometimes it's quite pleasant to be listened to when one's talking about oneself.

JAN

I'm afraid you won't find me much good at talking about myself. But, really, that won't be necessary. If I stay here

only a short time, there will be no point in your getting to know me. And if I make a long stay, you'll have plenty of opportunity of knowing who I am, without my speaking.

MARTHA

I hope you will not bear me any malice for what I've told you. There'd be no reason for it, anyhow. I've always found it better to be quite frank, and I had to stop your talking in a tone that was bound to lead to strained relations. Really I'm asking nothing out-of-the-way. Until to-day there was nothing in common between us, and some very special reasons would be needed for our suddenly becoming intimate. And you must forgive me if I fail to see, so far, anything in the least resembling a reason of that kind.

JAN

I'd forgiven you already. Indeed, I quite agree that intimacy isn't come by at a moment's notice; one has to earn it. So, if you now consider that everything's been cleared up between us, I can only say I'm very glad of it.

THE MOTHER *enters*.

THE MOTHER

Good afternoon, sir. Your room is ready now.

JAN

Thanks very much, madame.

THE MOTHER *sits down*.

THE MOTHER

[*To MARTHA.*] Have you filled in the form?

MARTHA

Yes, I've done that.

THE MOTHER

May I have a look? You must excuse me, sir, but the police here are very strict . . . Yes, I see my daughter's not put

down whether you've come here on business, or for reasons of health, or as a tourist.

JAN

Well, let's say as a tourist.

THE MOTHER

To see the Monastery, no doubt? It's thought very highly of, I'm told.

JAN

Yes, indeed; I've heard a lot about it. Also I wanted to see this place again. It has very pleasant memories for me.

THE MOTHER

Did you ever live here?

JAN

No, but a long time ago I happened to come this way, and I've never forgotten that visit.

THE MOTHER

Still, this is just an ordinary little country town.

JAN

That's so. But I'm much attached to it. Indeed, ever since I came here I've been feeling almost at home.

THE MOTHER

Will you be staying long?

JAN

Really I don't know. I dare say that surprises you, but it's the truth. I don't know. To stay in a place you need to have reasons—friendships, the presence of people you are fond of. Otherwise there'd be no point in staying there rather than elsewhere. And since it's hard to know if one will be made welcome, it's natural for me to be uncertain about my plans.

ACT I]

CROSS PURPOSE

THE MOTHER

That sounds a little vague, if I may say so.

JAN

I know, but I can't express myself better, I'm afraid.

THE MOTHER

Anyhow, I expect you'll soon have had enough of this place.

JAN

No, I've a faithful heart, and I soon build up memories and attachments, if I'm given a chance.

MARTHA

[*Impatiently.*] A faithful heart, indeed! Hearts count for mighty little here!

JAN

[*Seeming not to have heard her; to THE MOTHER.*] You seem terribly disillusioned. Have you been living long in this hotel?

THE MOTHER

For years and years. So many years that I have quite forgotten when it began and the woman I was then. This girl is my daughter. She's kept beside me all through those years, and probably that's why I know she is my daughter. Otherwise I might have forgotten her, too.

MARTHA

Really, mother! You've no reason to tell him all that.

THE MOTHER

You're right, Martha.

JAN

[*Hastily.*] Please don't say any more. But how well I understand your feelings, madame; they're what one comes to at the end of a long, hardworking life. Yet perhaps it might have been quite different if you'd been helped, as every woman should be helped, and given the support of a man's arm.

CROSS PURPOSE

[ACT I

THE MOTHER

Oh, once upon a time I had it—but there was too much work to do. My husband and I, together, could hardly cope with it. We hadn't even time to think of each other; I believe I had forgotten him even before he died.

JAN

That, too, I can understand. But [*He hesitates for a moment*—perhaps if a son had been here to give you a helping hand, you wouldn't have forgotten *him*?

MARTHA

Mother, you know we've a lot of work to do.

THE MOTHER

A son? Oh, I'm too old, too old! Old women forget to love even their sons. Hearts wear out, sir.

JAN

That's so. But he, I'm sure, doesn't forget.

MARTHA

[*Standing between them; peremptorily.*] If a son came here, he'd find exactly what an ordinary guest can count on: amiable indifference, no more and no less. All the men we have had here received that, and it satisfied them. They paid for their rooms and were given a key. They didn't talk about their hearts. [*A short silence.*] That simplified our work.

THE MOTHER

Don't talk about that.

JAN

[*Reflectively.*] Did they stay here long?

MARTHA

Some of them, a very long time. We did all that was needed for them to stay. Those who weren't so well off left after the first night. We didn't do anything for them.

ACT I]

CROSS PURPOSE

JAN

I've plenty of money and I propose to stay some little time in this hotel—if you're willing to keep me. I forgot to mention that I can pay you in advance.

THE MOTHER

Oh, we never ask people to do that.

MARTHA

If you are rich, so much the better. But no more talk about your heart, please. We can do nothing about that. In fact your way of speaking got so much on my nerves that I've very nearly asked you to go. Take your key and make yourself comfortable in your room. But remember you are in a house where the heart isn't catered for. Too many bleak years have passed over this little spot of Central Europe, and they've drained all the warmth out of the house. They have killed any desire for friendliness and let me repeat it, you won't find anything in the least like intimacy here. You will get what the few travellers who lodge with us are used to get, and it has nothing to do with sentiment. So take your key and bear this well in mind: we're accepting you as a guest, in our quiet way, for interested motives, and if we keep you it will be in our quiet way, for interested motives.

JAN takes the key and watches her go out.

THE MOTHER

Don't pay too much attention to what she says. But it is a fact there's some things she never could bear talking about [*She starts to rise. He comes forward to help her.*] Don't trouble, my son; I'm not a cripple yet. Look at my hands: they're still quite strong. Strong enough to hold up a man's legs. [*A short silence. He is gazing at the key.*] Is that what I just said that you're thinking about?

JAN

No. I'm sorry, I hardly heard it. But, tell me, why did you say "my son" just now?

THE MOTHER

Oh, I shouldn't have done that, sir. I didn't mean to take liberties. It was just . . . a manner of speaking.

JAN

I quite understand. Now I'll have a look at my room.

THE MOTHER

Certainly, sir. Our old manservant is waiting for you in the passage. [*He gazes at her, on the brink of speaking.*] Is there anything you want?

JAN

[*Hesitantly.*] Well . . . no, madame. Except that I'd like to thank you for your welcome.

He goes out. Left to herself, THE MOTHER sits down again, lays her hands on the table, and contemplates them.

THE MOTHER

That was a queer thing I did just now, talking about my hands. Still, if he had really looked at them, perhaps he'd have guessed what he refused to understand in Martha's words. But why must this man be so much bent on dying, and I so little on killing? If only he'd leave—then I could have another long night's rest! I'm too old. Too old to lock my hands again on a man's ankles and feel the body swaying, swaying, all the way down to the river. Too old for that last effort when we launch him into the water. It will leave me gasping for breath, and every muscle aching, with my arms hanging limp, without even the strength to wipe off the drops that splash up when the sleeping body plunges into the eddies. Too old, too old! . . . Well, well, since I must, I must! He is the perfect victim and

Act I]

CROSS PURPOSE

it's for me to give him the sleep I wanted for my own night. And so . . .

MARTHA *enters abruptly.*

MARTHA

There you are, day-dreaming again! And yet—we've much to do.

THE MOTHER

I was thinking of that man. No, really I was thinking of myself.

MARTHA

You'd do better to think about to-morrow. What good was it, not looking at that man, if you can't keep your thoughts off him? You said yourself, it's easier to kill what one doesn't know. Do be *sensible*.

THE MOTHER

That was one of your father's favourite words, I remember. But I'd like to feel sure this is the last time we'll have to be . . . sensible. It's odd. When your father used that word it was to drive away the fear of being found out, but when you tell me to be sensible it's only to quench the little spark of goodness that was kindling in my heart.

MARTHA

What you call a spark of goodness is merely sleepiness. But, only postpone your languor till to-morrow, and then you'll be able to take things easy for the rest of your days.

THE MOTHER

You're right, I know. But why should chance have sent us a victim who is so . . . so unsuitable?

MARTHA

Chance doesn't enter into it. But I admit this traveller is . . . really too confiding, his innocence is too much of a good thing. What would the world come to if condemned men

started unbosoming their sentimental troubles to the hang-man? It's unsound in principle. But it aggravates me too, and when I'm dealing with him, I'll bring to bear some of the anger I always feel at the stupidity of men.

THE MOTHER

That, too, is unsound. In the past we brought neither anger nor pity to our task; only the indifference it needed. But to-night I am tired, and you, I see, are angered. Are we really obliged to go through with it under these conditions, and to override everything for the sake of a little more money?

MARTHA

Not for money, but for a home beside the sea, and forgetfulness of this hateful country. You may be tired of living, but I, too, am tired, tired to death of these narrow horizons. I feel I couldn't endure another month here. Both of us are sick of this inn and everything to do with it. You, who are old, want no more than to shut your eyes and to forget. But I can still feel in my heart some of the absurd desires I had when I was twenty, and I want to act in such a way as to have done with them for ever—even if, for that, we must go a little further with the life we want to leave. And really it's your duty to help me; it was you who brought me into the world in a land of clouds and mist, instead of a land of sunshine.

THE MOTHER

Martha, I almost wonder if it wouldn't be better for me to be forgotten, as I've been forgotten by your brother, than to hear you speaking to me in that tone, the tone of an accuser.

MARTHA

You know well I did not mean to wound you. [*A short silence; then passionately.*] What could I do without you? What would become of me if you were far away? I, anyhow,

ACT I]

CROSS PURPOSE

could never, never forget you, and if at times the strain of this life we lead makes me fail in the respect I owe you, I beg you, mother, to forgive me.

THE MOTHER

You are a good daughter, Martha, and I can well believe that an old woman is sometimes hard to understand. But, I feel this is the moment to tell you what I've been trying all this time to say: "Not to-night."

MARTHA

What! Are we to wait till to-morrow? You know quite well you've never had such an idea before; and it would never do for him to have time to meet people here. No, we must act while we have him to ourselves.

THE MOTHER

Perhaps. I don't know. But not to-night. Let him be for this one night. It will give us a reprieve; we shall breathe freely for a while and enjoy the little lull of peace that comes, they say, at the heart of the worst crimes. Yes, let us have this respite. And perhaps it's through him we shall save ourselves.

MARTHA

Save ourselves? Why should we want to do that, and what an absurd thing to say! All you can hope for is to gain by what you do to-night the right to sleep your fill, once it's over.

THE MOTHER

That's what I meant by "saving ourselves." To retain the hope of sleep.

MARTHA

Good! Then I swear it's in our hands to work out our salvation. Mother, we must have done with indecision. To-night it shall be; or not at all.

Curtain.

ACT II

A bedroom at the inn. Dusk is falling. JAN is gazing out of the window.

JAN

Maria was right. This evening hour tells on the nerves. [*A short pause.*] I wonder what her thoughts are, what she is up to, in that other hotel bedroom. I picture her huddled up in a chair; she's not crying, but her heart's like ice. Over there the nightfall brought a promise of happiness. But here . . . [*Looks round the room.*] Nonsense! I've no reason for feeling this uneasiness. When a man starts something, he has no business to look back. It's in this room everything will be settled.

A sharp rap on the door. MARTHA comes in.

MARTHA

I hope I'm not disturbing you. I only wanted to change the towels and fill your jug.

JAN

Oh, I thought it had been done.

MARTHA

No. The old man who works for us sometimes forgets things like that.

JAN

They're only details, anyhow . . . But I hardly dare to tell you that you're not disturbing me.

MARTHA

Why?

JAN

I'm not sure that's allowed for in our . . . our agreement.

MARTHA

You see! You can't answer like any ordinary person, even when you want to make things easy.

JAN

[*Smiling.*] Sorry. I shall have to train myself. Only you must give me a little time.

MARTHA

[*Busy with the room.*] Yes, that's the whole point. [*He turns and looks out of the window. She studies him. His back is to her. She continues speaking as she works.*] I'm sorry, sir, that this room is not as comfortable as you might wish.

JAN

It's spotlessly clean, and that is something one appreciates. Unless I'm much mistaken, you had it done up not very long ago.

MARTHA

Quite true. But how can you tell that?

JAN

Oh, by some details.

MARTHA

Anyhow, many of our guests grumble because there isn't running water, and I can hardly blame them. Also, there should be a lamp above the bed; for some time we've been meaning to have one installed. It must be rather a nuisance for people who're used to reading in bed to have to get up to switch the light off.

JAN

[*Turning towards her.*] That's so. I hadn't noticed. Still it's not a very serious drawback.

CROSS PURPOSE

[Act II]

MARTHA

It's kind of you to take it like that. I am glad the defects of our hotel don't trouble you; in fact you seem to notice them less than we do. I've known people whom they'd have been enough to drive away.

JAN

I hope you'll let me make a remark that goes beyond our pact—and say that you're a very surprising person. One certainly doesn't expect hotel-keepers to go out of their way to point out defects in the accommodation. Really it almost looks as if you wanted to make me leave.

MARTHA

That wasn't quite what I had in mind. [*Coming to a sudden decision.*] But it's a fact that mother and I are rather reluctant to have you here.

JAN

I must say I noticed that you weren't doing much to keep me. Still, I can't imagine why. You have no reason to doubt my solvency, and I hardly think I give the impression of someone with a crime on his conscience.

MARTHA

Certainly not. If you must know, not only don't you look in the least like a criminal, but you produce the opposite effect—of complete innocence. Our reasons were quite different from what you think. We intend to leave this hotel shortly and we've been meaning every day to close down, so as to start preparing for the move. That had no difficulties, as we get so few visitors. But we could never quite make up our minds. It's your coming that has made us realize how thoroughly we'd abandoned any idea of going on with the business.

JAN

Am I to understand you definitely want to see me go?

ACT II]

CROSS PURPOSE

MARTHA

As I said, we can't decide; I, especially, can't decide. Actually everything depends on me and I haven't made up my mind yet, one way or the other.

JAN

Please remember this; I don't want to be a burden on you and I shall behave exactly as you wish. However, I'd like to say that it will suit me if I can stay here for one or two days. I have some problems to thrash out before moving on, and I counted on finding here the peace and quietness I need.

MARTHA

I quite understand your desire, I assure you, and, if you like, I'll reconsider the matter. [*A short silence. She takes some steps hesitantly towards the door.*] Am I right in thinking you'll go back to the country from which you've come?

JAN

Yes—if necessary.

MARTHA

It's a pretty country, isn't it?

JAN

[*Looking out of the window.*] Yes, a very pretty country.

MARTHA

Is it true that there are long stretches of the coast where you never meet a soul?

JAN

Quite true. There's nothing to remind you that men exist. Sometimes at dawn you find the traces of birds' feet on the sand. Those are the only signs of life. And in the evenings . . .

MARTHA

[*Softly.*] Yes? What are the evenings like?

CROSS PURPOSE

[ACT II]

JAN

Marvellous, indescribable! Yes, it's a lovely country.

MARTHA

[In a tone she has not used before.] I've thought of it, often and often. Travellers have told me things, and I've read what I could. And often, in the harsh, bleak spring we have here, I dream of the sea and the flowers over there. *[After a short silence, in a low, pensive voice.]* And what I picture makes me blind to everything around me.

After gazing at her thoughtfully for some moments, JAN sits down facing her.

JAN

I can understand that. Spring over there grips you by the throat and flowers burst into bloom by thousands, above the white walls. If you roamed the hills that overlook my town for only an hour or so, you'd bring back in your clothes a sweet, honeyed smell of yellow roses.

MARTHA, too, sits down.

MARTHA

How wonderful that must be! What we call spring here is one rose and a couple of buds struggling to keep alive in the monastery garden. *[Scornfully.]* And that's enough to stir the hearts of the men in this part of the world. Their hearts are as stingy as that rose-tree. A breath of richer air would wilt them; they have the springtime they deserve.

JAN

You're not quite fair; you have the autumn, too.

MARTHA

What's the autumn?

JAN

A second spring when every leaf's a flower. *[He looks at her keenly.]* Perhaps it's the same thing with some hearts; perhaps they'd blossom if you helped them with your patience.

ACT II]

CROSS PURPOSE

MARTHA

I've no patience for this dreary Europe, where autumn has the face of spring and the spring smells of poverty. No, I prefer to picture those other lands over which summer breaks in flame, where the winter rains flood the cities, and where . . . things are what they are. [*A short silence. JAN gazes at her with growing interest. She notices this and rises abruptly from the chair.*] Why are you looking at me like that?

JAN

Sorry. But since we seem to have dropped our convention for the present, I don't see why I shouldn't tell you. It strikes me that, for the first time, you've been talking to me with—shall I say?—some human feeling.

MARTHA

[*Violently.*] Don't be too sure of that. And even if I have been, you've no cause for rejoicing. What you call human feeling is not the nicest part of me. What is human in me is what I desire, and to get what I desire, I'd stick at nothing, I'd sweep away every obstacle on my path.

JAN

I can understand that sort of violence. And I have no cause to let it frighten me, as I'm not an obstacle on your path, and I've no motive for opposing your desires.

MARTHA

Certainly you have no reason to oppose them. But it's equally true you have no reason for furthering them and, in some cases, that might bring things to a head.

JAN

Why be so sure I have no reason for furthering them?

MARTHA

Common sense tells me that; also my wish to keep you outside my plans.

CROSS PURPOSE

[Act II]

JAN

Ah! That means, I take it, that we've returned to our conventions?

MARTHA

Yes, and we did wrong to depart from them—you can see that for yourself. Now it remains for me to thank you for having spoken of that country where you lived, and I must excuse myself for having, perhaps, wasted your time. [*She is on her way to the door.*] Still, let me tell you, the time was not wholly wasted. Our talk roused desires in me that were beginning to fall asleep. If you're really bent on staying here you've won your case without knowing it. When I entered this room I had almost decided to ask you to leave, but, as you see, you've played on my human feelings; now I hope you'll stay. And so my longing for the sea and sunshine will be the gainer by it.

He gazes at her without speaking for a moment.

JAN

[*Thoughtfully.*] You have a very strange way of talking. Still, if I may, and if your mother, too, has no objection, I'll stay on.

MARTHA

My mother's desires are weaker than mine; that's only natural. She doesn't think enough about the sea and those lonely beaches to make her realize you have got to stay. So she hasn't the same motives for wanting to keep you. But, at the same time, she hasn't any really strong motive for opposing me; and that will settle it.

JAN

So, if I've not misunderstood
for the sake of money, and

MARTHA

It does, I assure you. Sometimes a cup of tea's enough to keep our guests here.

She goes out. JAN picks up the cup, stares at it, puts it down again.

JAN

So the prodigal son's feast is continuing. First, a glass of beer—but in exchange for my money; then a cup of tea—because it encourages the visitor to stay on. But I'm to blame, too; I cannot strike the right note. When I'm confronted by that girl's almost brutal frankness, I search in vain for the words that would put things right between us. Of course, her part is simpler; it's easier to find words for a rebuff than those which reconcile. [*He picks up the cup, is silent for some moments, then continues in a low, tense voice.*] Oh God, give me the power to find my words aright, or else make me abandon this vain attempt, and return to Maria's love. And then give me the strength, once I have chosen, to abide by my choice. [*He raises the cup to his lips.*] The feast of the returning prodigal. The least I can do is to do it honour; and so I shall have played my part until I leave this place. [*He drinks. Loud knocking at the door.*] Who's there?

The door opens. THE MOTHER enters.

THE MOTHER

I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, but my daughter tells me she brought you some tea.

JAN

There it is.

THE MOTHER

Have you drunk it?

JAN

Yes. Why do you ask?

CROSS PURPOSE

[ACT II

THE MOTHER

Excuse me, I've come to fetch the tray.

JAN

[*Smiling.*] I'm sorry this cup of tea is causing so much trouble.

THE MOTHER

It isn't quite that. But, as a matter of fact, that tea was not meant for you.

JAN

Ah, there's the explanation. It was brought without my having ordered it.

THE MOTHER

[*Wearily.*] Yes, that's it. It would have been better if . . . Anyhow that hasn't any great importance, whether you've drunk it or not.

JAN

[*In a puzzled tone.*] I'm exceedingly sorry, I assure you, but your daughter insisted on leaving it, and I never imagined . . .

THE MOTHER

I'm sorry, too. But please don't excuse yourself. It was just a mistake.

She puts the cup and saucer on the tray and moves towards the door.

JAN

Madame!

THE MOTHER

Yes?

JAN

I must apologize again. I've just come to a decision. I think I'll leave this evening, after dinner. Naturally for the room, for the night. [*She gazes at him, in surprise.*] I quite understand your looking surprised. But please imagine you are in any way responsible for

change of plan. I have a great regard for you, a very great regard. But, to be candid, I don't feel at ease here, and I'd rather not stay the night.

THE MOTHER

That's quite all right, sir. Of course you can do exactly as you wish. Still, perhaps you may change your mind between now and dinner-time. Sometimes one yields to a passing impression, but, later on, things settle themselves and one gets used to new conditions.

JAN

I doubt it, madame. However, I would not like you to believe I am leaving because I'm dissatisfied with you. On the contrary, I am very grateful to you for welcoming me as you have done. For, I must say, I seemed to notice you had a certain . . . friendliness towards me.

THE MOTHER

That was only natural, sir, and I'm sure you understand I had no personal reasons for showing any ill-will.

JAN

[*With restrained emotion.*] That may be so—I hope so. But, if I told you that, it is because I want us to part on good terms. Later on, perhaps, I'll come back. In fact I'm sure I shall. And then things will certainly go better, and I've no doubt we shall find pleasure in meeting again. But just now I feel that I have made a mistake, I have no business to be here. In a word—though this may strike you as an odd way of putting it—I have a feeling that this house isn't for me.

THE MOTHER

I know what you mean, sir. But usually one feels that sort of thing immediately; you have been rather slow, it seems to me, to discover it.

JAN

I agree. But just now I'm rather at sea. I've come to Europe on some urgent business, and it's always a bit disconcerting, returning to a country after years and years of absence. I trust you understand what I mean.

THE MOTHER

Yes, I do understand, and I'd have liked things to turn out as you wished. But I think that, as far as we're concerned, there's nothing more we can do about it.

JAN

So it seems, I admit. Still, really, one never can be sure.

THE MOTHER

Anyhow, I think we have done everything needed to have you stay with us.

JAN

Indeed you have, and I've nothing to complain of. The truth is that you are the first people I have met since my return, so it's natural my first taste of the difficulties ahead should come when I'm with you. Obviously I alone am to blame for this; I haven't found my feet yet.

THE MOTHER

It's often like that in life; one makes a bad start, and nobody can do anything about it. In a way it's quite true that what has happened vexes me as well. But I tell myself that, after all, I've no reason to attach importance to it.

JAN

Well, it's something that you share my discomfort and that you try to understand me. I can hardly tell you how touched I am by your attitude, and how much I appreciate it. [*He stretches his hand towards her.*] Really I . . .

THE MOTHER

Oh, what you call my attitude's quite natural, really. It's our duty to make ourselves agreeable to our guests.

JAN

[*In a disappointed tone.*] That's so. [*A short silence.*] So it comes to this: all I owe you is an apology and, if you think fit, some compensation. [*He draws his hand over his forehead. He seems exhausted and is speaking less easily.*] You may have made preparations, gone to some expense; so it's only fair . . .

THE MOTHER

The only preparations we've made are those we always make in such cases. And I can assure you that you owe us no compensation. It was not on our account that I was regretting your indecision, but on yours.

JAN

[*Leaning against the table.*] Oh, that doesn't matter. The great thing is that we understand each other and I shan't leave you with too bad an impression of myself. Personally I shall not forget this house—be sure of that—and I hope that when I return I'll be in a better mood to appreciate it. [*She goes to the door without speaking.*] Madame! [*She turns. He speaks with some difficulty, but ends more easily than he began.*] I'd like . . . Excuse me, but my journey's tired me. [*Sits on the bed.*] I'd like anyhow to thank you for the tea, and for the welcome you have given me. And I'd also like you to know that when I leave this house I shan't feel quite a stranger.

THE MOTHER

Really, sir, we have done very little for you. And please don't think I meant to be disagreeable about the tea; only it's a fact it wasn't meant for you. Being thanked for something due to a mistake is always embarrassing.

She goes out. JAN watches her, makes as if to move, but one can see he is feeling limp. Then, leaning his elbow on the pillow, he seems to abandon himself to his growing lethargy.

JAN

Yes, I must handle it quite simply, quite straightforwardly. To-morrow I'll come here with Maria and I shall say "It's I." There's nothing to prevent my making them happy. Maria was right; I can see that now. [*He sighs, and leans back on the pillow.*] I don't like the feel of this evening; everything seems so far away. [*He stretches himself full-length on the bed, murmuring almost inaudibly.*] Yes, or no? After tossing about a little, JAN falls asleep. The room is in almost complete darkness. A long silence. The door opens. The two women enter, with a lamp.

MARTHA

[*After holding the lamp above the sleeping man; in a whisper.*] All's well.

THE MOTHER

[*In a low voice at first, but gradually raising it.*] No, Martha! I dislike having my hand forced like this. I'm being dragged into this act; you began it so that I'd have no chance of drawing back. I don't like your way of riding roughshod over my reluctance.

MARTHA

It is a way that simplifies everything. If you had given me any clear reason for your reluctance, I'd have been bound to consider it. But as you couldn't make up your mind, it was right for me to help you by taking the first step.

THE MOTHER

I know, of course, that it does not greatly matter; this man or some other, to-day or some later day, to-night or to-morrow—it had to come to that. None the less, I don't feel pleased about it.

MARTHA

Come, mother! Think of to-morrow, instead, and let's get busy. Our freedom will begin when this night ends.
She unbuttons JAN'S coat, extracts his wallet, and counts the notes.

THE MOTHER

How soundly he's sleeping!

MARTHA

He's sleeping as they all slept . . . Now let's start.

THE MOTHER

Wait a little, please. Isn't it strange how helpless and defenceless men look when they're asleep?

MARTHA

It's a rest they take before becoming again the savage brutes or silly apes they all are.

THE MOTHER

[*Meditatively.*] No, men aren't quite so remarkable as you seem to think, and really they don't change when they're asleep. It's we who look at them with different eyes, and the sudden nakedness of their faces, without any glow of passion or frown of discontent, takes us aback. But of course you, Martha, don't know what I mean.

MARTHA

No, mother, I don't. But I do know that we are wasting time.

THE MOTHER

[*With a sort of weary irony.*] Oh, there's no such hurry. On the contrary, this is the moment we can relax, now that the main thing's done. It's not the act itself that counts, but the embarking on it. Once a start is made, one's peace of mind returns. Why work yourself up like this? Is it really worth while?

MARTHA

Nothing's worth while, the moment one talks about it. It's better to get on with the work in hand and ask no questions of oneself.

THE MOTHER

[*Calmly.*] Let's sit down, Martha.

MARTHA

Here? Beside him?

THE MOTHER

Certainly. Why not? He has entered on a sleep that will take him far, and it's not likely he will wake up and inquire what we're doing here. As for the rest of the world—it stops short at that closed door. Why shouldn't we enjoy this little breathing-space in peace?

MARTHA

You're joking, and it's my turn to tell you I don't appreciate your way of talking.

THE MOTHER

You're wrong. I don't feel in the least like joking. I'm merely showing calmness, while you are letting your nerves run wild. No, Martha, sit down [*She gives a curious laugh*] and look at that man who's even more innocent in sleep than in his talk. He, anyhow, is through with the world. From now on, everything will be easy for him. He will pass from a dreamful sleep into dreamless sleep. And what for others is a cruel wrench will be for him no more than a protracted rest.

MARTHA

Innocence has the sleep that innocence deserves. And this man, anyhow, I had no reason for hating. So I'm glad he is being spared any pain. But I've no reason, either, for looking at him, and I think it a bad idea of yours, staring like that at a man whom presently you'll have to carry.

THE MOTHER

[*Shaking her head; in a low voice.*] When the hour comes we shall carry him. But we still have time in hand and perhaps it won't be such a bad idea—for him at any rate—if we look at him attentively. For it's not too late yet; sleep isn't death. Yes, Martha, look at him. He is living through a moment when he has no say in his fate; when his hopes of life are made over to indifferent hands. Let these hands stay as they are, folded in my lap, until the dawn and, without his knowing anything, he'll have entered on a new lease of life. But if they move towards him and form a hard ring round his ankles, he will lie in an unremembered grave for ever.

MARTHA

[*Rising brusquely.*] Mother, you're forgetting that all nights end, and we have much to do. First, we must look through the papers in his pockets and carry him downstairs. Then we'll have to put out all the lights and keep watch in the doorway as long as needs be.

THE MOTHER

Yes, there is much for us to do, and that is where we are in a different case from his; he, at least, is free now of the burden of his life. He has done with the anxiety of making decisions, with thoughts of work that must be done, with strain and stress. A cross is lifted from his shoulders; the cross of that inner life which allows of no repose, no weakness, no relaxing. At this moment he exacts nothing of himself and, old and tired as I am, I almost think that there lies happiness.

MARTHA

We've no time for wondering where happiness lies. When I have kept watch as long as needs be, there will still be much to do. We shall have to go down to the river and make sure some drunk man isn't sleeping on the bank.

Then we'll have to carry him down there as quickly as we can—and you know the effort that means. We shall have to do it in several stages and, once we are on the bank, swing him out as far as possible into mid-stream. And let me remind you again that nights don't last for ever.

THE MOTHER

Yes, all that lies before us, and the mere thought of it makes me tired, with a tiredness that has lasted so long that my old blood can't cope with it. And, meanwhile, this man has no suspicion; he is enjoying his repose. If we let him wake he'll have to start life again and, from what I've seen of him, I know he is much like other men and cannot live in peace. Perhaps that is why we must take him there and make him over to the mercy of the dark water. [*She sighs.*] But it's a sad thing so much effort should be needed to rid a man of his follies and put him in the way of peace.

MARTHA

I can only think, mother, that your wits are wandering. I repeat, we have much to do. Once he's thrown in, we shall have to efface the marks on the river-bank, blur our foot-steps on the path, destroy his clothes and baggage—make him vanish from the face of the earth, in fact. Time's passing and soon it will be too late to carry all this out with the composure that it needs. Really I cannot understand what has come over you, to be sitting at that man's bedside and staring at him, though you can hardly see him, and persisting in this absurd, useless talk.

THE MOTHER

Tell me, Martha. Did you know that he meant to leave this evening?

MARTHA

No, I didn't. But if I'd known, it wouldn't have changed anything, once I had made up my mind.

THE MOTHER

He told me that just now, and I didn't know how to answer him.

MARTHA

Ah! So you had a talk with him?

THE MOTHER

Yes, when you said you'd brought his tea, I came here. I'd have stopped him from drinking it, if I had been in time. As it was, once I knew the beginning had been made, I felt we'd better let things take their course; really it hadn't much importance.

MARTHA

If you still feel like that, there's no reason for dawdling here. So please get up from that chair and help me finish off this business—which is getting on my nerves.

THE MOTHER

[*Rising.*] Yes, I suppose I'll end by helping you. Only you might allow a few minutes more to an old woman whose blood doesn't flow as fast as yours. You've been on the rush ever since this morning, and you expect me to keep pace with you! Even that man there couldn't manage it; before he had framed the thought of leaving, he'd drunk the tea you gave him.

MARTHA

If you must know, it was he who made up my mind for me. You talked me into sharing your reluctance. But then he started telling me about those countries where I've always longed to go, and by working on my feelings hardened my heart against him. Thus innocence is rewarded.

THE MOTHER

And yet he'd come to understand. He said he felt that this house was not his home.

MARTHA

[*Violently and impatiently.*] Of course it is not his home. For that matter it is nobody's home. No one will ever find warmth or comfort or contentment in this house. Had he realized that sooner, he'd have been spared, and spared us, too. He would have spared our having to teach him that this room is made for sleeping in, and this world for dying in. Come, mother, and for the sake of the God you sometimes call on, let's have done with it.

THE MOTHER *takes a step towards the bed.*

THE MOTHER

Very well, Martha, we'll begin. But I have a feeling that to-morrow's dawn will never come.

CURTAIN

ACT III

The inn-parlour. THE MOTHER, MARTHA and the MAN-SERVANT are on the stage. The old man is sweeping and tidying up the room; MARTHA, standing behind the bar-counter, drawing back her hair. THE MOTHER is walking towards the door.

MARTHA

Well, you see that dawn has come and we've got through the night without mishap.

THE MOTHER

Yes. And to-morrow I'll be thinking it's a good thing to have done with it. But, just now, all I feel is that I'm dead tired and my heart's dried up within me. Ah, it was a hard night indeed!

MARTHA

But this morning is the first for years when I breathe freely. Never did a killing cost me less. I almost seem to hear the waves already, and I feel like crying out for joy.

THE MOTHER

So much the better, Martha. So much the better. As for me, I feel so old this morning that I can't share anything with you. But perhaps to-morrow I'll be in a better way.

MARTHA

Yes, and everything will, I hope, be better. But do please stop complaining and give me a chance of relishing my new-found happiness. I'm like a young girl again this

morning; I feel my blood flowing warm, and I want to run about and sing! . . . Oh, mother, may I ask you something? . . . [Pauses.]

THE MOTHER

What's come over you, Martha? You're like a different person.

MARTHA

Mother . . . [Hesitates; then in a rush.] Tell me, am I still pretty?

THE MOTHER

Yes, I think you're looking really pretty this morning. Some acts seem to have a good effect on you.

MARTHA

Oh no! Those acts you mean lie on me so lightly. But this morning I feel as if I'd been born again, to a new life; at last I'm going to a country where I shall be happy.

THE MOTHER

No doubt, no doubt. And, once I've got over my tiredness, I, too, shall breathe freely. Even now, it makes up for all those sleepless nights of ours, to know they'll have brought you happiness. But this morning I must rest; all I'm conscious of is that the night has been a hard one.

MARTHA

What does last night matter? To-day is a great day. [*To the servant.*] Keep your eyes open when you're sweeping; we dropped some of his papers on the way out and I couldn't stop to pick them up. They're on the floor somewhere. [THE MOTHER leaves the room. Sweeping under a table, the old man comes on JAN'S passport, opens it, runs his eyes over it, and hands it, open, to MARTHA.] I don't need to see it. Put it with the other things; we'll burn them all together. [*The old man goes on holding the passport to*

ACT III]

CROSS PURPOSE

MARTHA. *She takes it.*] What is it? [*The old man goes out. MARTHA reads the passport slowly, without showing any emotion; then calls in a voice that sounds completely calm.*] Mother!

THE MOTHER

[*From the next room.*] What do you want now?

MARTHA

Come here. [THE MOTHER returns. MARTHA gives her the passport.] Read!

THE MOTHER

You know quite well my eyes are tired.

MARTHA

Read!

THE MOTHER takes the passport, sits at the table, spreads it open, and reads. For a long while she stares at the page in front of her.

THE MOTHER

[*In a toneless voice.*] Yes, I always knew it would turn out like this one day—and that would be the end. The end of all!

MARTHA

[*Coming from behind the bar-counter, and standing in front of it.*] Mother!

THE MOTHER

No, Martha, let me have my way; I've lived quite long enough. I have lived many years more than my son. That isn't as it should be. Now I can go and join him at the bottom of the river, where already the weeds have covered up his face.

MARTHA

Mother! Surely you won't leave me alone?

THE MOTHER

You have been a great help to me, Martha, and I am sorry to leave you. If such words have any meaning left for us, I can honestly say you were a good daughter, in your fashion. You have always shown me the respect you owed me. But now I am very weary; my old heart, which seemed indifferent to everything, has learnt again to-day what grief means, and I'm not young enough to come to terms with it. In any case, when a mother is no longer capable of recognizing her own son, it's clear her role on earth is ended.

MARTHA

No. Not if her daughter's happiness remains to be ensured. And, no less than my heart, my hopes are shattered when I hear you speaking in this new, amazing way—you who had taught me to respect nothing.

THE MOTHER

[*In the same listless tone.*] It only proves that in a world where everything can be denied, there are forces undeniable; and on this earth where nothing's sure we have our certainties. [*Bitterly.*] And a mother's love for her son is now my certainty.

MARTHA

So you are not sure that a mother can love her daughter?

THE MOTHER

It's not now I'd want to wound you, Martha, but love for a daughter can never be the same thing. It strikes less deep. And how could I now live without my son's love?

MARTHA

A wonderful love—that forgot you utterly for twenty years!

THE MOTHER

Yes, it was a wonderful love that outlasted twenty years of silence and brought back to his home a son who seemed

ACT III]

CROSS PURPOSE

forgetful as he was forgotten. Say what you will, that love is wonderful enough for me—since I can't live without it. *She rises from her chair.*

MARTHA

It's not possible you can talk like that, without any thought for your daughter, without the least stirring of revolt!

THE MOTHER

Hard as it is on you, it *is* possible. I have no thought for anything; still less any feeling of revolt. No doubt this is my punishment, and for all murderers a time comes when, like me, they are dried up within, sterile, with nothing left to live for. That's why society gets rid of them; they're good for nothing.

MARTHA

I can't bear to hear you talking like that, about crime and punishment; it's . . . despicable!

THE MOTHER

I'm not troubling to pick my words; I've ceased to have any preference. But it's true that by one act I have ruined everything. I have lost my freedom and my hell has begun.

MARTHA

[Going up to her mother; fiercely.] You never spoke like that before. During all these years you've stood beside me, and your hands never flinched from gripping the legs of those who were to die. A lot you thought of hell or freedom in those days! It never occurred to you that you had no right to live, and you went on—doing as you did. What change can your son have brought to that?

THE MOTHER

I went on with it; that's true. But what I lived through then, I lived through by dint of habit, which is not so very different from death. An experience of grief was enough to

change all that, and my son's coming has brought that change. [MARTHA *makes a gesture and seems about to speak.*] Oh I know, Martha, that doesn't make sense. What has a criminal to do with grief? But I'd have you notice that my grief is not the wild grief that mothers feel; I haven't raised my voice as yet. It's no more than the pain of feeling love rekindle in my heart; and yet it's too much for me. I know that this pain, too, doesn't make sense. [*In a changed tone.*] But then this world we live in doesn't make sense, and I have a right to judge it, since I've tested all it has to offer, from creation to destruction.

She walks resolutely towards the door. MARTHA slips in front of her and bars the way.

MARTHA

No, mother, you shall not leave me. Don't forget that it was I who stayed beside you, and *he* went away. For a whole lifetime I have been with you, and he left you in silence. That must come into the reckoning. That must be paid for. And it's your duty to come back to me.

THE MOTHER

[*Gently.*] That's true enough, Martha. But he, my son, was killed by me.

MARTHA *has half-turned away and seems to be gazing at the door.*

MARTHA

[*After a short silence, with rising emotion.*] All that life can give a man was given him. He left this country. He came to know far horizons, the sea, free beings. But I stayed here, eating my heart out in the shadows, small and insignificant, buried alive in a gloomy valley in the heart of Europe. Buried alive! No one has ever kissed my mouth and no one, not even you, has seen me naked. Mother, I swear to you, that *must* be paid for. And now, when at last I

am to get what's due to me, you cannot, *must* not desert me on the vain pretext that a man is dead. Do try to understand that for a man who has lived his life death is a little thing. We can forget my brother and your son. What has happened to him has no importance; he had nothing more to get from life. But for me it's different, and you are spoiling me of everything, cheating me of the pleasures he enjoyed. Why must that man deprive me of my mother's love as well and drag you down with him into the icy darkness of the river? [*They gaze silently at each other; MARTHA lowers her eyes. She speaks now in a very low voice.*] I ask so little, so very little of life. Mother, there are words I never could bring myself to use, but—don't you think it would be soothing if we started our life again just as it used to be, you and I together?

THE MOTHER

Did you recognize him?

MARTHA

No, I didn't. I had not the slightest recollection of what he looked like, and everything happened as it was bound to happen. You said it yourself; this world doesn't make sense. But you weren't altogether wrong in asking me that question. For I know now that if I'd recognized him, it would have made no difference.

THE MOTHER

I prefer to think that isn't true. No soul is wholly criminal, and the wickedest murderers have moments when they lay down their arms.

MARTHA

I have such moments, too. But I would not have lowered my head to a brother whom I did not know and who meant nothing to me.

THE MOTHER

To whom then would you lower your head?

MARTHA *lowers her head.*

MARTHA

To you.

A short silence.

THE MOTHER

[*Quietly.*] Too late, Martha. I can do nothing more for you. [*Half-averting her eyes.*] Oh, why did he keep silence? Silence is fatal. But speaking is as dangerous; the little he said hurried it on. [*Turns towards her daughter.*] Are you crying, Martha? No, you wouldn't know how to cry. Can you remember the time when I used to kiss you?

MARTHA

No, mother.

THE MOTHER

I understand. It was so long ago, and I forgot so soon to hold out my arms to you. But I never ceased loving you. [*She gently thrusts aside MARTHA, who gradually makes way for her.*] I know it now; now that your brother's coming has brought to life again that intolerable love which I now must kill—together with myself.

The doorway is free for her to pass.

MARTHA

[*Burying her face in her hands.*] But what, oh what can mean more to you than your daughter's grief?

THE MOTHER

Weariness, perhaps . . . and my longing for rest.

[*She goes out. MARTHA makes no effort to detain her. Once her mother has left she runs to the door, slams it to, and presses herself against it. She breaks into loud, fierce cries.*]

MARTHA

No, no! What concern of mine was it to look after my brother? None whatever! And yet now I'm an outcast in my own home, there is no place for me to lay my head, my own mother will have none of me. No, it wasn't my duty to look after him—oh the unfairness of it all, the injustice done to innocence! For he—he now has what he wanted, while I am left lonely, far from the sea I longed for. Oh, how I hate him! All my life was spent waiting for this great wave that was to lift me up and sweep me far away, and now I know it will never come again. I am doomed to stay here with all those other countries, other nations, on my left hand and my right, before me and behind; all those plains and mountains that are barriers to the salt winds blowing from the sea, and the rumour of whose voices drowns its low, unceasing summons. [*In a lower tone.*] There are places to which, far as they may be from the sea, the evening wind brings sometimes a smell of seaweed. It tells of moist sea-beaches, loud with the cries of seagulls, or of golden sands bathed in a sunset glow that has no limit. But the sea-winds fail long before they reach this place. Never, never shall I have what's due to me. I may press my ear to the earth but I shall not hear the crash of icy breakers, or the measured breathing of a happy sea. I am too far from all I love, and my exile is beyond remedy. I hate him, yes, I hate him for having got what he wanted! My only home is in this gloomy, shut-in country where the sky has no horizons; for my hunger I have nothing but the sour Moravian sloes, for my thirst only the blood that I have shed. That is the price one must pay for a mother's love! There is no love for me, so let her die. Let every door be shut against me; all I wish is to be left in peace with my anger, my very rightful anger. For I have no intention of rolling my eyes heavenwards or pleading for forgiveness before I die. In that southern land, guarded by the sea, to which one can escape, where one can breathe freely,

press one's body to another's body, roll in the waves—to that sea-guarded land the gods have no access. But here one's gaze is cramped on every side, everything is planned to make one look up in humble supplication. I hate this narrow world in which we are reduced to gazing up at God.

But I have not been given my rights and I am smarting from the injustice done me; I will not bend my knee. I have been cheated of my place on earth, cast away by my mother, left alone with my crimes, and I shall leave this world without being reconciled. [*A knock at the door.*] Who's there?

MARIA

A traveller.

MARTHA

We're not taking any guests now.

MARIA

But my husband's here. I have come to see him.

MARIA *enters.*

MARTHA

[*Staring at her.*] Your husband. Who's that?

MARIA

He came here yesterday evening and he promised to call for me this morning. I can't understand why he didn't come.

MARTHA

He said his wife was abroad.

MARIA

He had special reasons for that. But we'd arranged to meet this morning.

MARTHA

[*Who has kept her eyes fixed on MARIA.*] That may be difficult. Your husband's gone.

MARIA

Gone? I don't follow. Didn't he book a room here?

MARTHA

Yes, but he left it during the night.

MARIA

Really I can't believe that. I know his reasons for wanting to stay in this house. But the way you speak alarms me. Please tell me frankly whatever you have to tell.

MARTHA

I have nothing to tell you, except that your husband is no longer here.

MARIA

I simply cannot understand; he would not have gone away without me. Did he say that he was going for good, or that he'd come back?

MARTHA

He has left us for good.

MARIA

Please listen. I can't bear to be kept in suspense any longer. Since yesterday I've been waiting, waiting, in this strange land, and now my anxiety has brought me to this house. I will not go away before I have seen my husband or been told where I can find him.

MARTHA

Your husband's whereabouts is your concern, not mine.

MARIA

You are wrong. You, too, are concerned in this, and closely. I don't know if my husband will approve of my telling you this, but I'm sick and tired of this futile game of make-believe. The man who came here yesterday is the brother you'd heard nothing of for years and years.

MARTHA

That's no news to me.

MARIA

[*Violently.*] Then—what can have happened? If everything has been cleared up, how is it Jan's not here? Did you not welcome him home, you and your mother, and weren't you full of joy at his return?

MARTHA

My brother is no longer here—because he is dead.

MARIA *gives a start and stares at MARTHA for some moments without speaking. Then she takes a step towards her, smiling.*

MARIA

Ah, you're joking, of course. Jan's often told me that when you were little you loved mystifying people. You and I are almost sisters and——

MARTHA

Don't touch me. Stay where you are. There is nothing in common between us. [*Pauses.*] I can assure you I'm not joking; your husband died last night. So there's no reason for you to stay here any longer.

MARIA

But you're mad, stark staring mad! People don't die like that—when one's arranged to meet them, from one moment to the other, all of a sudden. I can't believe you. Let me see him and then I may believe what I can't even imagine.

MARTHA

That's impossible. He's at the bottom of the river. [MARIA *stretches her hand towards her.*] Don't touch me! Stay there. I repeat; he is at the bottom of the river. My mother and I carried him to the river last night, after putting him to sleep. He didn't suffer, but he is dead sure enough, and it was we, his mother and I, who killed him.

MARIA

[*Shrinking away.*] It must be I who am mad. I'm hearing words that have never before been said on this earth. I knew that no good would come to me here, but this is sheer craziness and I will not share in it. At the very moment when your words strike death into my heart, it seems to me that you are talking of some other man, not of the man who shared my nights, and all this is a tale of long ago, in which my love never had a part.

MARTHA

It's not for me to convince you; only to tell you the truth. A truth which you will have to recognize before long. *

MARIA

[*In a sort of reverie.*] But why, *why* did you do it?

MARTHA

What right have you to question me?

MARIA

[*Passionately.*] What right? . . . My love for him.

MARTHA

What does that word mean?

MARIA

It means—it means all that at this moment is tearing, gnawing at my heart; it means this rush of frenzy that makes my fingers itch for murder. It means all my past joys, and this wild, sudden grief you have brought me. Yes, you crazy woman, if it wasn't that I've steeled my heart against believing, you'd learn the meaning of that word, when you felt my nails scoring your cheeks.

MARTHA

Again, you are using language I cannot understand. Words like love and joy and grief are meaningless to me.

MARIA

[*Making a great effort to speak calmly.*] Listen, Martha—that's your name, isn't it? Let's stop this game, if game it is, of cross-purposes. Let's have done with useless words. Tell me quite clearly what I want to know quite clearly, before I let myself break down.

MARTHA

Surely I made it clear enough. We did to your husband last night what we had done to other travellers, before; we killed him and took his money.

MARIA

So his mother and sister were criminals?

MARTHA

Yes. But that's their business, and no one else's.

MARIA

[*Still controlling herself with an effort.*] Had you learnt he was your brother when you did it?

MARTHA

If you *must* know, there was a misunderstanding. And if you have any experience at all of the world, that won't surprise you.

MARIA

[*Going towards the table, her hands clenched on her breast; in a low, sad voice.*] Oh, my God, I knew it! I knew this play-acting was bound to end in tragedy and we'd be punished, he and I, for having lent ourselves to it. I felt danger in the very air one breathes in this country. [*She stops in front of the table and goes on speaking, without looking at MARTHA.*] He wanted to make his homecoming a surprise, to get you to recognize him and to bring you happiness. Only at first he couldn't find the words that were needed. And then, while he was groping for the words, he

was killed. [*Weeping.*] And you, like two madwomen, blind to the marvellous son who had returned to you—for marvellous he was, and you will never know the great-heartedness, the noble soul, of the man you killed last night. . . . He might have been your pride, as he was mine. But, no, you were his enemy—oh, the pity of it!—for else how could you bring yourself to speak so calmly of what should make you rush into the street, screaming out your heart, like a wounded animal?

MARTHA

You have no right to sit in judgment without knowing all. By now my mother's lying with her son, pressed to the sluice-gate, and the current is beginning to gnaw their faces, and buffeting them against the rotting piles. Soon their bodies will be drawn up and buried together in the same earth. But I cannot see what there is even in this to set me screaming with pain. I have a very different idea of the human heart, and, to be frank, your tears revolt me.

MARIA

[*Swinging round on her fiercely.*] My tears are for the joys I've lost for ever; for a life's happiness stolen from me. And this is better for you than the tearless grief I shall have presently, which could kill you without the flutter of an eyelid.

MARTHA

Do not imagine talk like that affects me; really it would make little difference. For I, too, have seen and heard enough; I, too, have resolved to die. But I shall not join them; why, indeed, would I want their company? I shall leave them to their new-found love, to their dark embraces. Neither you nor I have any part in these; all that is ended and they are unfaithful to us—for ever. Luckily I have my bedroom and the roof-tree's strong.

MARIA

What does it matter to me that you die or the whole world falls in ruins, if through you I have lost the man I love, and henceforth I am doomed to live in a dark night of loneliness, where every memory is a torture?

MARTHA comes behind her and speaks over her head.

MARTHA

Don't let's exaggerate. You have lost your husband and I have lost my mother. We are quits. But you have only lost him once, after enjoying his love for years and without his having cast you off. My lot is worse. First my mother cast me off, and now she is dead. I have lost her twice.

MARIA

Yes, perhaps I might be tempted to pity you and share my grief with you, did I not know what was awaiting him, alone in his room, last night, when you were plotting his death.

MARTHA

[*Her voice has a sudden accent of despair.*] I'm quits with your husband, too, for I have suffered as he suffered. Like him, I thought I had made sure my home for always; I thought that crime had forged a bond between me and my mother that nothing could ever break. And on whom in all the world should I rely, if not on the woman who had killed beside me? I was mistaken. Crime, too, means solitude, even if a thousand people join together to commit it. And it is fitting that I should die alone, after having lived and killed alone. [MARIA turns towards her, tears streaming down her cheeks. MARTHA moves back, her voice grows hard again.] Stop! I told you not to touch me. At the mere thought that a human hand could lay its warmth on me before I die; at the mere thought that anything at all

resembling the foul love of men is dogging me still, I feel the blood pulsing in my temples in a fury of disgust.

MARIA *has risen to her feet. The two women now are face to face, standing very near each other.*

MARIA

Have no fear. I shall do nothing to prevent your dying as you wish. For with this hideous pain that grips my body like a vice, I feel a sort of blindness falling on my eyes and everything around me is growing dim. Neither you nor your mother will ever be more to me than vague, fleeting faces that came and went in the course of a tragedy which can never end. For you, Martha, I have no hatred and no pity. I have lost the power of loving or hating anybody. [*Suddenly she buries her face in her hands.*] But then—I have hardly had time to suffer or to rebel. My calamity was . . . too big for me.

MARTHA

[*Who has taken some steps towards the door, comes back towards MARIA.*] But still not big enough; it has left you eyes to weep with. And I see that something remains for me to do before leaving you for ever. I have yet to drive you to despair.

MARIA

[*Gazing at her, horror-stricken.*] Oh, please leave me alone! Go away, and let me be!

MARTHA

Yes, I am going, and it will be a relief for me, as well. Your love and your tears are odious to me. But before I go to die, I must rid you of the illusion that you are right, that love isn't futile, and that what has happened was an accident. On the contrary, it's now that we are in the normal order of things, and I must convince you of it.

MARIA

What do you mean by that?

MARTHA

That in the normal order of things no one is ever recognized.

MARIA

[*Distractedly.*] Oh, what do I care? I only know that my heart is torn to shreds, and nothing, nothing matters to it except the man you killed.

MARTHA

[*Savagely.*] Be silent! I will not have you speak of that man; I loathe him. And he is nothing to you now. He has gone down into the bitter house of eternal exile. The fool! Well, he has got what he wanted; he is with the woman he crossed the sea to find. So all of us are served now, as we should be, in the order of things. But fix this in your mind; neither for him nor for us, neither in life nor in death, is there any peace or homeland. [*With a scornful laugh.*] For you'll agree one can hardly call it a home, that place of clotted darkness underground, to which we go from here, to feed blind animals.

MARIA

[*Weeping.*] I can't, oh no, I can't bear to hear you talk like that. And I know he, too, wouldn't have borne it. It was to find another homeland that he crossed the sea.

MARTHA

[*Who has walked to the door, swings round on her.*] His folly has received its wages. And soon you will receive yours. [*Laughing as before.*] We're cheated, I tell you. Cheated! What do they serve, those blind impulses that surge up in us, the yearnings that rack our souls? Why cry out for the sea, or for love? What futility! Your husband knows now what the answer is: that charnel house where in the end we shall lie huddled together, side by side. [*Vindictively.*] A time will come when you, too, know it, and then, could you remember anything, you would recall as a delightful

III] CROSS PURPOSE

memory this day which seems to you the beginning of the cruellest of exiles. Try to realize that no grief of yours can ever equal the injustice done to man.

And now—before I go, let me give a word of advice; I owe it to you, since I killed your husband. Pray your God to harden you to stone. It's the happiness He has assigned Himself, and the one true happiness. Do as He does, be deaf to all appeals, and turn your heart to stone while there still is time. But if you feel you lack the courage to enter into this hard, blind peace—then come and join us in our common house. Good-bye, my sister. As you see, it's all quite simple. You have a choice between the mindless happiness of stones and the slimy bed in which we are awaiting you. *She goes out. MARIA, who has been listening in horrified amazement, sways, stretching out her arms in front of her.*

MARIA

[*Her voice rising to a scream.*] Oh God, I cannot live in this desert! It is on You that I must call, and I shall find the words to say. [*She sinks on her knees.*] I place myself in your hands. Have pity, turn towards me. Hear me and raise me from the dust, oh Heavenly Father! Have pity on those who love each other and are parted. *The door opens. The old MANSERVANT is standing on the threshold.*

THE OLD MANSERVANT

[*In a clear, firm tone.*] What's all this noise? Did you call me?

MARIA

[*Gazing at him.*] Oh! . . . I don't know. But help me, help me, for I need help. Be kind and say that you will help me.

THE OLD MANSERVANT

[*In the same tone.*] No.

CURTAIN